DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 208 CS 210 435

AUTHOR	Reagan, Sally, Ed.
TITLE	Teaching Creative Writing.
INSTITUTION	Iowa Council of Teachers of English.
PUB DATE	87
NOTE	85p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Editors, Iowa English Bulletin, Dept. of English, Drake University, Des Moines, IA 50311.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
JOURNAL CIT	Iowa English Bulletin; v35 n1 1987
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Characterization; *Creative Writing; Elementary Secondary Education; Fiction; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; Learning Strategies; Literary Devices; Poetry; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

Providing a mix of theoretical and practical suggestions, the articles in this focused journal issue present strategies for teaching various aspects of creative writing. The articles included and their authors are as follows: (1) "What Are We Up To?" (K. Stein); (2) "And Now a Word from Molly and Ned" (M. Martone); (3) "Student Fiction Writers and Dr. Frankenstein" (P. Parris); (4) "Criticism--The Art of Give and Take" (P. Gebauer); (5) "The Model Poem" (M. Stanton); (6) "Teaching Creative Writing to High School Students: The Teacher as Guide" (A. N. Fragola); (7) "What Is Your Permanent Address? Questions and Answers" (R. Whitman); (8) "A Wilderness with a Map: Teaching the First Course in Creative Writing" (P. St. Clair); (9) "Gail Goodwin's 'The Finishing School': A Contemporary Link to the Classic and the Moral" (J. Dyer); (10) "Hope versus Despair in Student Fiction" (J. B. Cohen); (11) "History, Myth, and Poetry: Writing the Historical Poem" (R. Whitman); and (12) "Teaching the Writing of Poetry: Analogies with Three Other Disciplines" (A. L. Clements). (JD)

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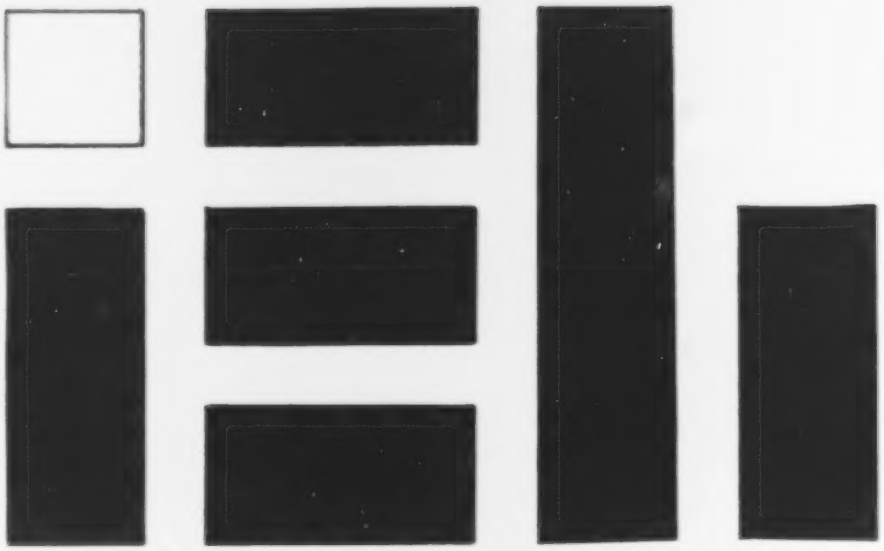

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SPECIAL ISSUE: Teaching Creative Writing

Volume 35, Number 1, 1987

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Manuscripts should follow the *MLA Handbook*, 2nd edition, guidelines for endnotes. Send manuscripts to Sally Reagan, Editor, *Iowa English Bulletin*, Department of English, Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa 50311.

The editor reserves the right to edit essays so that their usage complies with the *Guidelines for Non-sexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications*.

Subscriptions
The *Iowa English Bulletin* is published annually by the Iowa Council of Teachers of English. Subscriptions are free to ICTE members and $3.00 per year to subscribing institutions. Remittances should be made payable to the *Iowa English Bulletin* by check, money order, or bank draft. Communications regarding orders, subscriptions, single copies, or notice of change of address should be addressed to the Editors, Department of English, Drake University, Des Moines, IA 50311.

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Editor's Note

Last year, when my former co-editor, Peggy Parris, and I were discussing the next issue of the *Iowa English Bulletin*, we decided to do something new. Since she writes both fiction and poetry, Peggy had noticed that there was a dearth of articles on how to teach creative writing. To fill that gap, we decided to devote an entire issue to that very subject — teaching creative writing. So we put out a call for papers. The quality and quantity of essays we received in response both pleased and surprised us and I think you will be pleased to get such a helpful mix of theoretical and practical strategies as well. To let you know what to look for, here is an overview of what you'll find in this special *Bulletin*.

Kevin Stein sets the tone by asking, "What Are We Up To?" — a good question to consider when teaching creative writing. A poet and essayist himself, Stein sees creative writing as involving more than teaching grammar, though less than "creating poets." With the next two pieces, we move from reasons to teach to practical ways to do it. Michael Martone, a fiction writer, offers a teaching strategy based on a party game, which makes students aware of language; Peggy Parris, who also has studied the use of invention in writing, presents a heuristic for helping students develop characterization.

More practical advice follows. Phillip St. Clair and Phyllis Gebauer discuss ways to prepare creative writing students to give and take criticism when workshopping their papers. From there, we move on to a variety of approaches to teaching both fiction and poetry. Maura Stanton's "The Model Poem" suggests ways to introduce students to the conventions of writing poetry. Fiction writer Anthony Fragola counters by introducing fiction writing-as-a-process to his second language, inner city students. His article ends with a sample essay written by one of these pupils. Back to poetry, Ruth Whitman suggests using a questionnaire format to teach students one kind of basic poem format. She is followed by Joyce Dyer, who advocates teaching modern fiction to introduce students to the conventions of novels.

This issue closes with more theoretical articles. Judith Beth Cohen discusses the types of issues students deal with when writing fiction. Arthur Clements compares the teaching of poetry to music, painting, and philosophy to demonstrate how an awareness of the conventions of these disciplines can help students better focus and develop their writing. Finally, Ruth Whitman returns to give us some background on writing the historical poem.

I hope you like the 1987 *Bulletin*. If you have any suggestions for future thematic issues, please let me know. In the meantime, however, I

welcome articles on any aspect of teaching English. Or, if you don't want to submit an article, write and suggest people whose work we should solicit, such as presenters you may have heard at conferences.

One final note — you may have noticed that Peggy Parris is no longer listed as co-editor. There's a reason for that. Peggy has moved to North Carolina, where she accepted a position at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. The rest of us at Drake University and on the *Bulletin* staff miss her already, but wish her the best. This issue, which was her idea, is dedicated to her.

— *Sally Reagan, Editor*

What Are We Up To?

by
Kevin Stein

Though it may be a perilous and presumptous task, it seems sensible — in an issue devoted to the techniques we use in teaching creative writing — to ask a larger and perhaps more unsettling question of ourselves. When we walk into the creative writing classroom, loaded down with our favorite poems and practice exercises, just what is it that we are up to? What are our purposes for the class, or more importantly, what can we reasonably expect our students to accomplish and take with them as a result of having experienced it?

Partly, I'll admit, these questions have recently come to mind as a result of my conversation with a couple of writer-teachers regarding the objective of poetry writing courses. One of them remarked sanguinely that the purpose of these writing classes was simply to *make* poets. The other was more pragmatic, though no less frightening. He asserted that the university-level poetry writing course provided a splendid place to emphasize the grammar and mechanics that most students had not learned. Though extreme in opposing directions and surely open to vitriolic argument, the two positions may nonetheless possess some merit.

Certainly we can't claim to make poets, though we can teach some matters of craft to those with talent, and along the way we might find occasion to teach the use of the dash or the semicolon to those who don't already know it. Still, what about the others, the great majority of our students? Neither of these goals — however admirable to those who profess them — may be regarded as our primary objective for the students who take an undergraduate poetry writing course. We're not apt to encounter many young masters there, nor is the poetry writing class an arena for imparting exclusively the rules of grammar and mechanics. Then again, what troubled me most about these two answers was the real difficulty I would find (or have already found) in answering the question if it were asked by a skeptical administrator or even a curious friend.

While I don't claim to have all the answers, or even the majority, I do believe that some possible responses to this question can be discovered by examining the methods that a number of us use in our own classrooms and by assessing the results that we hope might issue from them. What follows, then, is less an attempt to prescribe what a poetry writing class should do than what it might or can do, given that we are not operating, as *Candide* reminds us, in the best of all possible worlds.

The poetry writing class is a kind of small community, a collective of diverse individuals there for a variety of purposes. Some merely want the credit hours or seek a way to avoid a General Education course which they assume will be more demanding. Others are curious to see if they'll show skills they didn't know they possessed, while some may see the class as a way to sharpen their prose. Still others, the passionate ones, are certain only that they want to be poets; they see the class as an outward expression of their inward commitment. We have no choice but to welcome them all.

The writing class is a learn-by-doing course. We ask our students to write, read, and comment on other classmates' and other poets' work; occasionally we ask them to write down those comments for later study. To focus this activity, we often assign exercises for the class members to work on individually, asking our students: to write a poem without adjectives, to use this first line, to revise this bad poem, to compose a "hate" poem or a poem about "rain" without using that word, and in spite of all their objections, to write a sonnet.

The assignments may be common but the results are consistently uncommon, for the students learn both to discipline and to free themselves and their language. They recognize the freedom and the constraint of any form or formlessness and choose to welcome or reject it; surely, both resolutions can be productive. Analyzing rules and structures and then deciding to keep or break them is knowledge useful for their writing and for their lives in general. Such assignments ask the students to be attentive to language — its nuances, its rhythms, its suppleness. Having worked so hard to shape their language within the prescriptions of the exercise, they may be better able to notice and seek for themselves the kind of dedication to craft that represents the skilled writer of poetry or prose.

In addition to teaching students about form and language, these exercises, like every piece the students work on throughout the semester, offer them an entryway to their own emotional and intellectual lives. In writing a "hate" poem, a poem about a parent, or a poem of social commentary, they may find, as others have found before them, that writing often leads to discovery. In their lamentations and celebrations, the students may come to terms with some bit of knowledge that had been previously unspoken, but nonetheless intuited or felt. Often the real poem is not the poem they set out to write but the one they discover in the process of writing. Similar to the lady in the Forster novel who argues — "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" — they may come to know themselves better, and while poetry surely is not therapy, perhaps self-knowledge lessens the need for it.

To supplement these exercises, we offer voluminous examples, models of what to do or what not to do. These examples reveal the real pleasures and responsibilities of writing. We may read from Bradstreet and Rich one day, from Herrick and Whitman the next, always hoping to elicit by example the breakthroughs of expression that characterize the quantum leaps with which student writers sometimes amaze us. Beyond showing, for example, the practical matter of how James Wright uses the image in his terse lyrics, these models encourage the students to read widely and extensively in all literatures. They may read for pleasure, or with an eye for detail, technique, rhetoric, but the important matter is that they are reading, that they are opening themselves to other lives and other attitudes. In the process, students may learn something human and essential about their own and other cultures.

When these poems are read out loud — and when we encourage our students to read as well as listen to them — they hear the music of the poem in a manner that the printed page can rarely reproduce. This extends and revivifies an oral tradition, a kind of dance with words, that nearly everything in contemporary life conspires against. The students learn the musical quality of language, the rhythm of word and phrase, the art of repetition and pause. The words they have spoken and written before almost without noticing may seem suddenly more powerful, mysterious, even magical. This may very well be real poetry: a vigorous awareness of language that refuses to be subdued by the argument that words are ineffectual and ultimately limited entities.

When students are asked to read carefully and explain their assessments of others' work, they learn to think critically: to know what they like or don't like and why. It can be argued, of course, that students receive similar benefits in a literature survey course when asked to respond to a poem or a piece of fiction; the results, however, are similar, not identical. For one thing, the students in the poetry writing class are actively involved in creating their own texts and reading those created by their small community of classmates. They are compelled by the very nature of the "learn-by-doing" structure of the class to attend sensitively to the matters of rhetoric and style behind the choices that compose other poems; they must do the same for themselves as they write their own.

It can be argued that a poem amounts to a series of choices, human and artistic decisions to reveal or withhold something, to talk in plain or florid language, to speak with honesty or duplicity. The students in a poetry writing class should be well aware of how the resolution of these choices incrementally shapes a poem. Luckily, because the class is collectively as well as individually involved in the shared goal of communicating to a reader, they are often more willing to risk an opinion in the

hope of contributing to and learning from that communal process. Even a failure to articulate one's tastes can prove instructive. When a student is unable to verbalize just why she likes a particular piece of work, she has come to acknowledge that sometimes the rhythm and sound of an image are as important as its meaning, that what makes us want to dance isn't always possible to articulate (as the teenagers who rate-a-record on Bandstand continually remind us).

Perhaps most significantly, through the above assignments and through the larger decision our students have made to think and write, they become more attentive — to themselves, to their friends or enemies, to the world that surrounds them. We ask them to be attentive enough and brave enough to look carefully at one thing at a time. As a result, they may begin to see their world in the singular and the particular, not in the plural and the abstract. Where they might have seen only "trees" and said so in a poem, instead they may now see blackjack and bur and chinkapin, ash and hickory. This attentiveness is certainly not the exclusive province of the poet, or teacher, or Buddhist monk. With a concerned and religious effort, it is open to all of us.

Such an attitude, though, may not make us any more calm with our place in the world; in fact, it may work against such peacefulness because it will not allow a giddy innocence or a smug complacency. Such attention insists that we are, like Thoreau, "forever on the alert" to both the appalling and the beautiful. But to seek the truth about ourselves and our world and to wish to express it, is a fundamental human concern that does not end with the semester or with graduation. Perhaps our students can carry with them some fresh awareness of language, an appreciation of what others have written about the world using that language, maybe even a moderate sense of discipline and craft. But if they take away some personal or cultural knowledge gained from writing, reading, and thinking, something which holds a mark of their personality and which they have been able to express in a poem, no matter how roughly, then all of us are the richer.

And Now a Word From Molly and Ned

by
Michael Martone

Here is a story.

Ernest Hemingway took the Rorschach test. The Rorschach test is a projective test which uses inkblots. It is a test with no right answers. It is given to reveal things about a person's personality. The psychiatrist says, "Tell me what you see in these pictures." Now there are no right answers, of course, but the number of responses is noted. The average is seven or eight. "It's a butterfly. A bird flying. Two people kissing." That sort of thing.

The story goes that Ernest Hemingway saw up to ten times as many things in each picture. Our first response upon hearing that might be: well, sure, the man had a gift, he had imagination, he could see more. But that would be too easy a way out and not at all fruitful if you are teaching creative writing. No, when Hemingway took the test something else happened that is significant to the teacher of creative writing, his answers point out what can be learned in the classroom.

Hemingway did something that helped him see more. After making the usual number of responses to the picture in the way it had been presented to him, he reached out and took the picture in his hands and turned it 90 degrees. Now he had a new picture to see and respond to. And when he had exhausted this view, he turned the picture again. The instructions do not say "don't touch the inkblots," yet most people do not reach out and touch the things they are asked to describe.

Now this is probably an apocryphal tale, but I tell it to my class first thing every year. It is a good story. That's one reason I tell it to them. Another reason is that it suggests that they begin examining their own habits of perception before they get on with new habits of expression. It is what their intro psych class called functional fixedness. It isn't an urn after all; it is two faces in profile. But most importantly, the tale introduces the physical back into this classroom realm. Hemingway, by reaching out, took control of the world he was asked to talk about. He yanked it around. I want my students to see this connection between types of manipulations, the concrete and abstract.

The problem in the creative writing classroom, perhaps all classrooms, is how to make the abstract concrete. The problem is acute in

the writing classroom because the very thing the student is learning to use concretely, the language, is one big abstraction. When people find out I am a story writer, they tell me that one day they are going to write that novel. I believe that if I were a violinist I might still hear what they've always wanted to play but the step to get there, learning the violin, seems to be an obvious impediment. The instrument, the tool of the writer is hard to see in all that ink. It is hard for people to think of language as they think of a violin. After all, language just came to them. No Suzuki. One day babble, the next Mom understands you want a drink of water. So, early in every semester I am standing in front of students who have been fiddling around with the language for close to twenty years. My task is to convince these students that for them to be successful storytellers they must not take that language for granted. They must be able to step back — really, not just metaphorically — from words, to see the thingness of words. Then the students can begin to see how words come apart and go together.

I do this by taking their language away from them.

I ask you, does a fish know it is in water? If a fish can know anything, when would it know it is in water? Only when it is taken out of the water, right? We are, of course, so saturated in our language that it does not exist. The game I play leaves my students only for a brief moment in a new atmosphere that might as well be a vacuum or a fishbowl, for they are unable to exist here. They gasp and grope and then, as the psychiatrists say, we are ready to begin.

The name of the game is Molly and Ned.

The object of the game is to guess the rules of the game.

You can ask me questions. I can answer yes or no.

It is a cocktail party game. I am not sure if drinking would actually help or hinder. In the classroom I divide the class into two groups. It is early in the semester. This might help the students get to know each other. The teams create an illusion of competition. They will discover that they will need everybody to get out of this. They will learn they have to listen to each other and to speak clearly. All of these skills will be useful later in workshops. I think this team-making signals that this classroom is a different kind of classroom — no lectures and no textbooks. They themselves are the texts.

Here is the answer to the puzzle. The first letter of the last word generates my answer. If the letter is *m* or before in the alphabet, the answer is yes. If it is *n* or after, it is no. Molly and Ned. The game is so difficult that if I don't give clues and prompts we couldn't finish it in an

hour period. There are certain turning points I look for then to give these little boosts.

The first questions are all concerned with content. "Can four people play this game?" "Yes." "Can seven people play?" "No." "Is Molly important?" "Yes." The questions get longer, weighted down with clauses that carry specific information. Often I repeat the sentence to make sure of the last word and answer. Soon the questions slow. One by one the sudents have entered that vacuum. Their questions are getting answers, but those answers don't seem to be getting them anywhere. This is the point where they are left without language because up to this time they probably have been using language only to get that glass of water from Mom. Language has just been a vehicle for the exchange of information, simple narratives, needs. I step out of the game. The students have ground to a halt. They are already peeved at me. They are students, after all, doing what students are expected to do: ask questions. They are getting brisk confident responses to their thoughtful inquiries. And they are getting nowhere. They are getting further away.

At this moment I tell them about the fish out of water. They may not get it, for they are interested only in returning to the swim again. I ask them what else might be going on in their questions besides content once they understand that is what they've been stuck on. I tell them to question the assumptions they are making when they ask these questions. The teams conference and come out with more of the same questions — more pointed perhaps. "Is this game dumb?" they ask. "Yes," I say, smiling.

Soon, and it is soon now because they are mad, they reach another turning point. I've simulated a foreign land. I've made their language real by taking it away. It is the key that no longer open doors. It is a door that suddenly is a wall.

"You're lying," one of them says. This is important. It is important because they are beginning to look at what is going on in the language we are using, not just what is being carried by it.

I step out of the game, repeat the three clues and ask who said anything about truth. I might go on and tell the Hemingway story, suggesting to them that what is not said can be just as important as the thing said. The attack might be that I am being random in my answers. I assure them that the answers are consistent to the questions, that language and the language you use to solve the puzzle are all part of the game. I mention that when I play this game with younger students they solve it faster, which is true, and I ask them why that is. Then I step back into the game.

Soon the questions begin to turn to theory. "If a man asks a question you answer no?" a woman asks. "No," I say and then, to tease,

"That could be a yes, of course." I suggest they might want to write down a record of answers since they haven't done that yet. Is there a pattern? I praise them for their theories. They are beginning to look at their sentences. Is it the number of words? If a verb comes first you answer no? I answer no and then ask the questioner if his sentence began with a verb. Often they don't know. It is still so hard to shake the notion of content. By golly, when they ask a question they want a straight answer.

I hope that they will see I can take them out of their language, make it useless for them in the ways they usually use language. I hope that they will also see language as something they can learn to hold in front of their eyes, to experiment on, to test. I suggest the scientific method to the students playing the game. What is the control? The sentence. It all comes down to the sentence. The variable? Could be the gender of the speaker, the number of words, a word's position. But you won't know by asking directly. Treat this as a phenomenon of nature. If you know I am lying, why ask questions you don't know the answers to? Ask if my shirt is red or blue. See where I stray from what you expect. Why ask things that make sense at all? Why use sentences at all? Narrow down as many options as you can. Two word questions. One word.

They begin to narrow in on it. They begin to understand how easy the solution was, how it was right in front of them, how their own language obscured their vision. How fat that language had become. How thick. How dense. How real.

In my course evaluations, my students always write to say how much they hated Molly and Ned. I am not sure they grasp the lessons it teaches. But they remember the game. They go on in the semester to do the things they wanted to do in the first place: write stories. But the bug is planted. I use this simple cocktail party game to let my students feel that primal fear of not having language to manipulate the world and then to simulate in its return that magic moment when it first came to them. This is water. This is mother. Their language becomes again that powerful appendage that lets them turn everything upside down.

Student Fiction Writers and Dr. Frankenstein

by

P. B. Parris

A story begins at the pre-writing stage. Before the first draft, the best of the writer's knowledge is put into generating the raw material that is special to fiction. Then, the best of the writer's feeling goes into writing the first draft and all those that follow. Part of the preparation for writing a story is character building, a pre-writing activity that students need direction and practice in.

The material special to fiction, character and action, are what give a novel or short story a life of its own. More specifically, a story is a series of actions and resulting events. What sets the cause-and-effect ball rolling and determines which direction it will take and where its motion will finally cease is character, the nature of the person (or persons) central to the story.

Beginning fiction writers too often plunge right into the fray, writing a story about some sort of action — a suicide, a plane crash, a lovers' quarrel — and then get stuck trying to resolve the situational complications they've created for themselves, or else they call down a creaking *deus ex machina* to straighten things out. But the plot in good, solid fiction — the complications and their eventual resolution — grows, as I've said, out of the nature of the characters, whether the story is realistic or fantasy, whether the characters are human beings or animals that behave like human beings. The writer can only develop action and resolve complications satisfactorily through the choices made by the character(s), and those choices must be in keeping with each character's basic nature. A character may be changed by something that happens in the story, but only to the extent that he or she is inherently capable of change.

So the first step for fiction writers is to construct — and in the process get acquainted with — their main characters. The writer at the pre-writing stage is like Frankenstein, building characters from bits and pieces of other people — friends, relatives, even strangers. Often, writers begin with some admired or dreaded trait or feature of their own because, as T. S. Eliot has said, "Some bit of himself that the author gives to a character may be the germ from which the life of that character starts."

Apprentice fiction writers can be helped in learning to assemble characters through the use of a set of invention questions developed specifi-

cally for that purpose. Below is the text of a handout I give students after some instruction in Macrorie's free writing:

PROFILE

Getting inside your main characters enables you to understand how they think and feel so that the conflict in your story can grow consistently from their personalities, and their behavior will be convincing to the reader.

Answer the following questions quickly and freely. Skip around if you like, but try to get something down for each of them. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or making complete sentences — or even sense. Just put down as many specific details as possible, as if you were omniscient, no matter what the point-of-view of the story itself will ultimately be.

1. What's the character's full name?
2. What're some observable facts about age, physical appearance, clothing, mannerisms of behavior and speech that would make it possible to pick _____ out of a crowd?
3. Where was _____ born?
4. What's _____'s family background?
5. How does _____ feel about the family? Why?
6. What kind of education has _____ had?
7. Who're _____'s friends?
8. What're those friendships like?
9. What's _____'s day-to-day routine?
10. How does _____ feel about the opposite sex?
11. How does _____ feel about money? Why?
12. How does _____ feel about God and religion? Why?
13. What does _____ daydream about?
14. What makes _____ angry? Why?

15. What's _____ afriad of? Why?

16. What does _____ want? Why?

17. What does _____ need? Why?

18. How much is _____ capable of change?

Writers may find other aspects of their characters they want regularly to explore at the pre-writing stage and may modify PROFILE by adding any additional questions to the list.

Here'a an example of character building with PROFILE. Sarah, a student fiction writer, sits down to do some pre-writing for a short story. After answering the first question with "Terese Marie Cuny," she freely writes her response to the questions, substituting "Tess" for the blank in each.

What follows is an excerpt from Sarah's PROFILE pre-writing, her answer to questions No. 4 on family background:

> strong, strong Catholic faith. Descendants of German immigrants, not poor but not extremely well off either. Tess was one of 8 children, after George died of polio when he was 18 months old. She was second oldest after Carolyn (three year age difference.)

Sarah jots down something for all the questions until she feels the fictional personality is as fully developed as she can make it at that time. She may come back to her answers later and add to or change some details.

Clearly, not all the data Sarah generates will find its way into her story, but knowing what she now does about her character, she will be better able to understand how Tess might behave in whatever fictional conflict Sarah might set her into and how others will react to Tess. Before beginning a first draft, Sarah will also explore in the same way any other major characters — in this case, the spinster sister Carolyn with whom Tess lives — in her story.

Like the product of any pre-writing invention technique, the phrases and sentences produced with the PROFILE questions will need to be set aside for a period of incubation before the first draft of the story is written.

Apprentice writers are not the only ones who can benefit from the use of PROFILE, nor is it only helpful at the planning stage. Even though I've been writing fiction for many years and have learned to run

through the questions mentally before I begin a story, I still find it useful on occasion to systematically explore my characters explicitly in writing. For example, I recently found myself unable to complete, to my satisfaction, a story I'd been working on, off and on, for nearly three years. My protagonist, Elizabeth, an educated yet passive woman, was in a situation which I knew she could no longer accept, but I couldn't foresee how she would resolve the central conflict. It wasn't until I re-examined the character of her husband, using free writing and the PROFILE questions, that I saw what suddenly seemed a most natural and appropriate course for her to take. So the use of PROFILE is not limited to beginning writers; moreover, it is appropriate at the re-writing as well as the pre-writing stage.

Using a series of imagination-guiding questions like PROFILE, the student fiction writer can build a cast of characters before going on to write and rewrite drafts of the resulting story. And because the writer will have fully developed the main character(s), the conflict in the story can develop consistently, and satisfactory handling of the resolution will not only suggest itself to the writer, but will also be convincing to the reader.

Criticism - The Art of Give and Take

by
Phyllis Gebauer

Some years ago when I read a section of my then-unpublished novel in a workshop at a writers' conference, I had a shattering experience that almost ended my career as a writer.

I can still remember that room, where I sat, and what I was wearing. But most of all I remember the comments: dogmatic, judgmental, and personal. Then a barrage of questions. Why had I done *this*? Why hadn't I done *that*?

I answered as best I could; then, when the session was over, ran to my room, locked the door, and gave way to a mini-breakdown. This was it. The opinion of my peers. I was a failure.

Later that day I was pulling myself together out by the pool when one after another of the people who had been in that morning's workshop came up to express concern about the attacks I'd received, then to assure me my work was good, as doubtless I knew by all the compliments.

Compliments?

Yes. Hadn't I heard them?

No, I hadn't. But as those people gave me *their* version of that workshop, I realized I had a lot to learn about the art of giving and taking criticism.

Since then I've progressed from student to published writer to workshop leader myself. I've had criticism that really helped, some that really hurt, and along the way had a chance to observe and talk about the experiences of other writers. As a result, I'm convinced there are skills involved in giving and getting comments. Skills we writers have to learn as much a we have to learn how to write an effective lead, create a convincing character, or devise a metaphor.

First, let's talk about "taking it." Here are ten tips I give my students to help them keep their perspective, sort through what they get, then use it wisely.

1. *Be aware of your mind-state.* Whether you're used to getting comments or not, the entire process may make you feel ill at ease, anxious,

and vulnerable. This is because your work in a sense is yourself, reflecting as it does your limitations and strengths as well as your world-view. And there you are, asking someone else to sit in judgment. That isn't easy, so if the comments you get are negative, don't be surprised if you feel hurt, angry, defensive or resentful.

2. *Be aware of what you really want.* You may think you're asking only for comments, but what you really want are two things that may be incompatible: an honest opinion and affirmation. Chances are you'll get the former more often than you will the latter, but if the response has been negative, just knowing that any resultant depression may be caused partly by the denial of your human need to get approval may help you fight the mood off and get back to your keyboard.

3. *Be aware that you may not hear right.* When the coments you get are verbal, some masochistic urge we all seem to share may keep you from hearing all but the "bad stuff." Equally destructive (to your work if not your spirit) is the screening that lets you hear only the "good," thereby avoiding rewrites. Maybe it's our Puritan culture, but the latter kind of faulty hearing doesn't come into play all that often. The solution in both cases is easy: take notes or, whenever possible, use a tape recorder.

4. *Take care whom you ask.* If your friends or relatives haven't read fiction in years, why give them Chapter One of your experimental novel? Or show an article about computers to someone who reads only fantasy? Better to be considered a reclusive eccentric, or if you feel *compelled* to let these people know what you're up to, resolve in advance not to let their comments (good or bad) make any difference. The best rule of all, though, is to show your work only to people whose opinion you're going to trust, or who you know aren't for some reason out to get you.

5. *Don't take it personally.* Hard as it is to accept, you can make mistakes in your writing and still be a decent human being. When people pan what you've done, remind yourself that while, yes, in a sense your writing is you, in another sense it's just a product you want to make marketable. The trick is to keep the criticism focused where it belongs: on the work, not on the person who produced it. That isn't easy if your commentators are careless about the way they express themselves. Which leads to the next point.

6. *Learn to recognize a personal attack and rise above it.* What does a personal attack sound like? It's usually emotional and accusative. "You have a genius for avoiding conflict and confrontation." "You didn't build up any suspense." "You didn't give me any descriptions." See the implications? It's not the work that's at fault, it's *you*. You did

something wrong. Were remiss. Naughty. A question of semantics? Partly, but what those rebuking words do is zap you right back to early childhood. That's daddy talking, hear him? So what do you do? The same things you did when you were a kid. Argue. Defend yourself. Feel rebellious and angry. All of which takes your attention away from improving your work and puts it right onto protecting your ego. So what's the solution? Well, you can't change your commentators' phrasing any more than you can change the attitudes that made them express themselves like that in the first place. But you *can* zap yourself back to being a grown-up. Meaning you can identify the attack for what it is, then gird your emotional loins, hear what the person has to say, and see what you can learn from it.

7. *Look where it's coming from.* This I learned from actress-writer Brett Somers soon after the workshop that so upset me. She told me that if I read a scene where a middle-aged man makes love to his wife on a cold stone floor, and when I finish, three gray-haired men tell me the action in that scene is implausible, I should consider that it may not be my writing those men are reacting to, but a threat they see in my subject matter. All of which is another way of saying you've got to look beyond your commentators' words to any possible moods, blind-spots, or prejudices that may have led those people to say what they did to you. This doesn't mean their negative comments aren't going to hurt. It's just that by considering their source, you force yourself to stay more objective.

8. *Don't waste time and energy trying to defend yourself.* In the first place, it's useless to argue with a person's reaction: it just is. (But you do have to look where it's coming from). And in the second, your goal is to find out what may be wrong with your work, not to justify what you've already put down there. What I do to avoid defensive confrontations in my workshops is to forbid authors to say a word after they've read aloud until all the comments - including mine - have been duly noted. By then, having been forced to listen, the authors have usually discerned a thread running through the remarks and instead of issuing a challenge, merely thank the group for having been helpful.

9. *If the response is negative, remind yourself you can't please everyone.* Self-evident, true, but worth mentioning because we all need approval. What you have to do, then, is admit this need exists, then remind yourself that just as you can't expect to be universally loved and esteemed, neither can you expect your work to be. Which is why there are so many different agents, editors, and publishers.

10. *Sort through what you get, then apply with caution.* Not all criticism is created equal. Some you'll reject because you know the commentator hasn't understood you. Or listened. Or read right. Other you'll

accept because you've heard it so many times before, you've decided it must be valid. Then there's the gray zone: comments you aren't quite sure of. The only thing you can do about those is to trust your instincts — which for me seem to be centered right in my solar plexus. I can *feel* when a comment "hits home" or "goes against me." But affirmative, negative, or in-between, the comments you get should be written down, then put side until you feel calm and collected enough to look them over dispassionately. Only then - in an objective state of mind - can you decide what you are and aren't going to pay attention to. And unless you have an editor who says do it my way or the deal is off, only *you* can make the final decision.

That seems to sum up "taking." Now let's talk about "giving." On the surface, this appears to be easier, but there are problems. Not so much with what you say, but with how you say it. Here, then, are ten tips that will help you give an honest response without hurting either the work or the person who wrote it.

1. *Don't pontificate.* Secretly, we all believe our taste to be the touchstone, our insights the deepest, our judgments the most impartial. But resist that urge to put on a long white robe and speak as though from a mountain top. Just present your comments for what they are: one man's or woman's opinion.

2. *Remember how it feels to be "taking it."* You've been there. You know how it feels to put your work (and yourself) on the table. So don't try to get revenge on all the people who once carved *you* up. Break the chain. Be sympathetic, encouraging, helpful. This doesn't mean you can't say what you're really thinking. But until you know the person well, or are working with him or her as a colleague, there's a way to say "this is really rotten" that gets your point across without driving it deep into the other persons's psyche.

3. *Don't hide where you're coming from.* If for some reason you're critiquing a science fiction piece and you don't like this genre, say so. Acknowledging your preferences, possible blind spots, limitations, and fields of expertise helps the person whose work is being judged put your comments in perspective.

4. *Don't forget to mention the "good stuff."* "Listen to find the writer's strengths," novelist and screenwriter S. L. Stebel tells the students in his workshops at the Santa Barbara Writers' Conference. For it is by knowing what they do well that writers - particularly those just starting out - are able to nourish and develop their particular skills, find their own voice, and evolve a truly personal style. Otherwise, by hearing only the negative, writers are likely - especially when doing a rewrite - to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. I know. I've done it.

So when I'm critiquing my students, I mention the "good stuff" first so I won't forget it. Also, I've found that a bit of praise at the beginning of a critique sets up a climate in which a lot of "bad stuff" can be discussed, but the writers still feel that they have been affirmed as human beings.

5. *Don't launch a personal attack.* In giving criticism as with any other kind of communication, you can't watch every word or you'll drive yourself crazy. Still, as often as you can, try to phrase your critique in terms of what's wrong and right with the work rather than in terms of what the writers did or didn't do when they were writing it. For example, if you say "I didn't feel any sense of place here" or "there wasn't any sense of place here," you're stating a fact. But if you say, "you didn't describe the setting," you're making an accusation. A subtle difference, but if you keep the discussion focused on the work, the writer won't feel so threatened and may actually hear you. And it's not just a question of being polite. Your aim is to do what the late Robert Kirsch, novelist and critic for the Los Angeles *Times*, used to urge: "Criticize the work, but spare the human being."

6. *Honor the writer's intention.* This means if you think a work has problems, feel free to suggest additions, deletions, or rearrangements, but unless you're a professional editor, don't do a total rewrite. That wouldn't be fair because it would give the work *your* vision and *your* truth when it was the writer's ideas that inspired the piece and that should remain there to its conclusion.

7. *Before recommending the work to someone else, make sure you see it.* When people read aloud you're often swayed (for better or worse) by their voice, intonation patterns, reading skill, and appearance. I remember one day an attractive young man read a comedy piece in my workshop and had me and the group in hysterics. Later I lunched with an editor who asked if I'd heard anything good that morning. I told him I had and tracked down a copy. Horrors. Where were all the laughs? Certainly not on the paper. Shamefaced, I brought the editor the work with an explanation. "Don't worry," he said. "Happens all the time." But I learned then and there not to recommend a thing until I'd seen it.

8. *In a workshop or class, don't give a critique if you've just received one.* This, too, I learned the hard way. I read a scene from my book, made note of the comments, then listened to my friend Carolyn Doty read from her work, *A Day Late.* The comments she got were affirming - all about how the group had really felt her character's *angst* when he was alone in his motel room. "Not me," I announced, then went on about how I not only hadn't felt the character's pain, I hadn't understood where we were or what the man's problem was. Of course I

hadn't. I'd been so busy mulling over what had been said about *my* piece, I'd barely heard a word. Yet I was so hyper, I couldn't keep my mouth shut. So a word to the wise. When you've just gotten off the "hot seat," be wary.

9. *In a workshop or class, critique the work, not the other critiques.* Literary in-fighting is what you get when writers comment on one another's comments. And that's not only boring, it makes authors sit through things like "Oh, no, surely not reminiscent of James. You must mean Maughm. Or maybe Chekhov," when all they want to know is what works and doesn't work in their own piece. Unfortunately, just because *you* don't play show-off games doesn't mean the others won't. And the only one who can effectively stop them is the leader or teacher. Still, a private suggestion to these critics about staying with the work at hand may do the trick.

10. *Take care what you put down on paper.* A funny thing happens when you critique a work you don't particularly like or in which you feel the authors haven't lived up to their promise. You get angry, vindictive. Perhaps because you feel betrayed, perhaps because you resent all the time and energy you've spent critiquing it. Whatever . . . out comes the pen and there - slash, slash - go the editing marks, quips, maybe even swear words. Catharsis. Which is all well and good if you and the author have been friends since your early childhood. But if you haven't, that viciously marked-up manuscript, and maybe a separate page of brutal straight-from-the-shoulder notes can really hurt. Most of us know. We've received such things from teachers, colleagues, agents, or editors. And many of us keep passing the tradition on, thinking perhaps that writers worth their salt have to learn to take it. But I wonder. Is it being knocked down, then getting up that makes us improve? Or is it the sense that for all our errors, our set-backs, we are really *good* - is that the thing that keeps us going and makes us better?

Affirmation, that to me is the name of the game, whether it's affirming even one small aspect of a developing writer's skill, or in the case of ourselves, believing that something inside us is worth nourishing, coaxing out, and putting down on paper. Because there comes a time when even the strongest flame starts to flicker. It's happened to me, and judging from the many promising writers whom I've counseled after a harsh critique has almost destroyed them, I know I'm not alone out there.

So let's watch how we and our students "dish it out." Maybe then we won't have to spend so much time and energy teaching them how to take it.

The Model Poem

by
Maura Stanton

When I use model poems in poetry writing classes, I'm actually teaching more than meets the eye — I'm teaching students how to write poems, but I'm also teaching them how to read literature, and how to grow as writers in the years *after* my class. I teach poetry as a serious art (I don't think of writing poems as word play or therapy). By using model poems, I can show the students that William Shakespeare, and John Keats, and Elizabeth Bishop are part of a living tradition that they can learn from for the rest of their lives.

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" is a poem that I like to use as a model in introductory poetry writing classes because it allows me to focus on so many of the basic elements that are part of a good poem. First of all, "The Fish" has a clear dramatic situation, which is established in the opening lines, "I caught a tremendous fish/and held him beside the boat." The poet creates an "I" speaker — a real human being in a boat. We aren't listening to a disembodied, oracular voice speaking from nowhere. This is a crucial lesson for beginning students, and in the course of a semester, using good poems by contemporary writers as well as poems by the great writers of the past, I illustrate many uses of the dramatic situation. And when the class begins looking at their own poems on worksheets, I encourage the students to be in the discussion by asking: "What is the dramatic situation? Who is speaking? Where is she?"

"The Fish" also allows me to focus on narrative structure. The poem is epiphanic — it moves toward a moment of discovery, a revelation, as relentlessly as a story by Flannery O'Connor. Once the class begins to see how dramatic situation and narrative work in this poem and in other model poems, they are able to see how it works (or doesn't work) in their own.

The imagery and concrete detail in "The Fish" are precise and imaginative. It would be possible to spend a whole class looking at Bishop's description in lines like "He was speckled with barnacles," or "I thought of the coarse white flesh/packed in like feathers." The poem emphasizes the concreteness of language necessary to poetry. When Bishop finally does allow herself to use the abstract word "victory" in line 66, we know exactly what she means by it. If she had begun the poem with "Victory fills up the little rented boat," the word would have remained a nebulous and abstract concept.

Finally, "The Fish" lets me talk about meter. The poem is in a loose accentual trimeter, and I like to show the students how to hear the stresses. I don't want them to use rhyme, but I do want them to be able to *hear* meter, and use it in their own poems. I want to break the association between rhyme and meter, and Bishop's unrhymed but accentually metered poems, "The Fish" and "In the Waiting Room," provide excellent examples.

* * * * *

Exercises based on model poems not only result in better poems from the students, but also train them to think like poets. Later, when the students are writing on their own, they will know how to funnel their emotions into particular dramatic situations, characters, or images. Consciously or unconsciously they will be able to create their own exercises.

I give two kinds of exercises: subject exercises, which teach the students what to write about, and structural exercises, which teach them how to shape their material.

"I couldn't think of anything to write about," is one of the most common laments in a beginning poetry writing class. While providing a focus for a particular poem, subject exercises gradually expand the amount of experience available to the students, and encourage them to look in many different places for subjects. Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," if it is used as a model for such an exercise, can result in a student poem that emphasizes concrete detail, imagery, narrative and empathy; at the same time it shows the students that poems don't begin with abstractions, but with the sights and sounds of the real world. The next time they sit down to write, they might remember a visit to a hospital, or a grocery store, or their grandfather's farm. Philip Larkin's "Whitsun Weddings" is a fine model for a student poem that uses a bus or plane or train trip for its dramatic situation.

Subject exercises based on model poems teach students to create their own exercises, using their own model poems. If I ask students to look at persona poems like Tennyson's "Ulysses," or Louise Gluck's "Gretel in Darkness," I am giving them a method for writing as well as models. Next year, when they've forgotten my name but want to write, they won't simply stare at a piece of blank paper. They'll remember some of the poems they read and perhaps a poem in the voice of Psyche or Cinderella will occur to them. They won't think of it as an exercise. They'll be thinking as poets.

Once the student knows what to talk about in a poem, the focus can change to ways of saying it. Exercises can be based on the emotional or narrative structure of a poem, or on a poem's formal pattern. Elizabeth

Bishop's villanelle "One Art," for example, moves from a series of minor losses (keys, hours) to major losses (houses, continents) to the heartbreaking loss of a beloved person. Students could be asked to structure their own material (which might be very different) in a way similar to Bishop's poem. Or "One Art" could be used, along with Dylan Thomas's more formal "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" as a model for a villanelle assignment. "One Art" is a particularily useful model poem because its organic structure is as clear to students as its mechanical structure, and it is exciting for them to see how both elements contribute to the shape of the poem.

Structural exercises help the students to internalize the movement, or plot, of many poems. Later, when they are writing on their own, they'll remember something about the dramatic structure of Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale" or Frost's "Birches" which may help them to shape their own material. The more poems they know well, the more possible directions they'll have for the development of their subject.

* * * * *

I think it's important to show and discuss contemporary poems in poetry writing classes — good poems from anthologies and magazines and books — because poets who use the language and subject matter of the middle and late 20th century will seem more accessible to beginning students. Garrett Hongo's fine poem "The Hongo Store/29 Mile Volcano/Hilo/Hawaii," about a family photograph taken when he was a baby, can send students to their own photo albums, or make them think about their family histories in new ways. But I think Shakespeare and Donne and Keats and Yeats belong in poetry writing classes, too. I remember being completely baffled by "Among School Children" the first time I saw it in a college literature class. I'd been taught to look for symbols and hidden meanings, and my eye glided right past the literal dramatic situation of the opening. The "sixty-year-old smiling public man" stood for something else and therefore had no real existence or importance in the poem — my eye jumped from one mysterious word to another, and I understood nothing about the poem except through the penciled notes I wrote in the margin when the teacher lectured. When I read the poem again years later, after I'd begun writing poetry myself, I was astonished at my earlier difficulty, but at least I had real insight into the mind of an inexperienced reader of poetry.

A poetry writing teacher can make the great poems accessible by using them as models along with contemporary poems. Some of the greatest poets in English were able to make immense leaps in their own work by studying and imitating the great poets before them. When Milton wrote *Comus*, says George Saintsbury in his *History of English Prosody*, he had "Immediately before him such things of Shakespeare's

as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*." In Keats, Saintsbury says, "the process of deliberate pupilage, working itself out to mastery, is traceable all through."

In a one semester poetry writing class, when most of the time is spent discussing the students' own work, I may be able only to teach a handful of great poems — Clarence's wonderful speech about his dream in *Richard III* ("Methought that I had broken from the tower. . . ."), Yeats' "An Irish Airman Forsees His Death" (when I give a persona poem exercise), Donne's "The Sun Rising" or Larkin's "Church Going." But if I can give the students a method by which they can teach themselves, as they grow as readers and writers over the years, I will have given those who are talented, ambitious, and hardworking their most valuable tool.

I. C. T. E. CALL FOR PAPERS

The Iowa Council of Teachers of English invites program prospoals for its 1987 Fall Conference, October 16 and 17. The theme of the conference is "Teacher as Learner," and seminars and panel discussions on various aspects of teaching language arts will be offered, including reading and writing in grades 1-8, teaching the talented and gifted, the research paper, literacy, censorship, writing across the curriculum, reader-response criticism, and the role of literary theory in the literature classroom.

The conference will be held at the Marriott Hotel in Des Moines with Janet Emig as one of two keynote speakers. Please plan to attend as the conference promises to be both lively and instructive.

Send program proposals to:

Dr. James Marshall
Program Chair
N297 Lindquist Center
College of Education
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242

or to:

Nancy Williams
College Section Program Chair
Drake University
English Department
Des Moines, IA 50311

The deadline for receipt of proposals is July 1, 1987.

Teaching Creative Writing To High School Students: The Teacher As Guide

by
Anthony N. Fragola

While I was a teacher trainee in the Los Angeles Unified School District, I was assigned to teach English at Roosevelt High School in the heart of the East Los Angeles Barrio. Roosevelt has nearly a fifty percent drop-out rate, and for most of the students, English is a second language. At first I was assigned to teach five classes of remedial English, but after a few weeks I was given one tenth grade College Core Curriculum Class. The students in the CCC Program were not considered academically gifted, but they had expressed an interest in attending college.

With few exceptions, the majority of the twenty-seven students in the class were Mexican-American. Two girls were Vietnamese; both were bright, one was truly gifted. Another was a Chinese girl who had been in this country only a few months. I had taught her remedial English and felt that she could thrive in a normal classroom. One male student had recently arrived from El Salvador, and another female was part Cuban.

The students' command of English varied widely and in some cases did not meet grade level. However, with proper structuring and by adopting the philosophy that the teacher should serve more as a guide to the creative process than as the sole authority figure, I felt it was possible to teach a successful unit on creative writing even when the students had not yet developed advanced language skills in English and needed remedial work.

The teacher trainee program emphasized that "writing is a process, not merely a product to be assessed." Subscribing to that philosophy, I used it as my guiding principle to structure the unit on creative writing. I took an integrated approach which incorporated all the elements of language, not simply the telling of a story, but also grammar, spelling, syntax, style, and oral expression.

Teaching creative writing to high school students, especially those who have a poor command of English, involves more than teaching mechanics and technique. The teacher must first provide models from literature and then gain the trust of the students.

During the first semester, I used one of the standard texts adopted by the Roosevelt staff, *Questions and Form in Literature,* published by Scotts Foresman & Co., to teach a unit on the short story. I selected stories about young protagonists from three different ethnic groups: "A Visit To Grandmother," by William Melvin Kelley, about a Black youth; "A Short Return," by Durango Mendoza, a story about a Latino boy; and "Of Dry Goods and Black Bow Ties," by Yoshiko Uchida, a reminiscence by a young Japanese woman.

These stories were grouped under the rubric of "Generations," and I felt that the conflicts which arise between generations was a theme everyone could identify with. I also strongly felt that since all my students were either immigrants or children of immigrants, the conflicts which arise from a clash of cultures was another theme they could incorporate into their writing. Cultural conflicts embodied within generational conflicts were dominant themes in my own short stories. I related how, as an Italian-American and the first grandchild born in the United States, I had grown up with conflicting loyalties and sensibilities which left me searching for an elusive sense of identity.

I urged my students to retain as much of their cultural heritage as possible. We examined the ways in which their lives were influenced by native values expressed by their parents and the oftentimes opposing values of American culture. I discovered, for example, that many of the parents of my Latino students did not want their children to go to college out of fear of destroying family closeness. On the other hand, the parents of my Vietnamese and Chinese students demanded high academic standards and expected their children to attend college, but one close to home.

We also analyzed the stories in terms of structure, point of view, theme, characterization, setting, and tone. I incorporated vocabulary building from the stories and used E. B. White's *Elements of Style* as a model for grammar because it was simple and direct.

The following semester, before asking students to write about themselves, I sought to foster an atmosphere of trust by organizing a unit on interviewing. We first made a list of about twenty-five questions on the personal, private, and future professional life of each student. In addition to the usual questions about family background and place of birth, likes and dislikes, I had them ask questions about their strongest memories, their greatest sense of loss, the most influential people in their lives, those to whom they felt closest, and their goals. This proved to be a good interviewing technique and helped the students think in terms of characterization in their development of fictional characters.

I divided the class into dyads and assigned a quiet student or one

lacking self-confidence with someone more verbal and assured. The groups interviewed one another in and outside of class, wrote reports, and read them to the entire class. This unit brought the students to a greater awareness of one another, and enabled me to better understand their lives and problems.

In order to gain my students' trust, I showed them samples of my own writings and read one or two of my stories aloud. I stressed the importance of rewriting and brought in various drafts of stories and a review in progress to illustrate how drastically material can change from one draft to another.

One of my stories, "In My Grandmother's Bed," had recently been published in *STORIES*. Since this fiction was clearly autobiographical, it could further serve as a model for their next assignment, which was to write a vignette based on a personal incident. The story was written in the first person, as their own pieces would be, and involved a young narrator who experiences jealousy when his grandmother is wooed by a suitor. Using my work, I could also explain the progression of the story from conception to publication.

Since students often have no concept of the process of revision, I told them that I had written "In My Grandmother's Bed" at least a dozen times before an editor expressed an interest in publishing it. Even then I had to consider meticulous editorial suggestions and rewrote the story two more times before it was finally published. I confessed to the class how disheartened I felt at first, but once I studied my work objectively I had to admit that, in most instances, the editor was right and her suggestions helped me to perfect the story. I expressed the enormous satisfaction I felt at seeing "In My Grandmother's Bed" finally in print.

Another important aspect of teaching creative writing to high school students, or to any level, is to give them a goal. A creative writing assignment is simply not enough to generate real interest and commitment in a process which can be arduous as well as fulfilling. The teacher must provide a greater goal, and mine was to offer them the possibility of having their work published in the school literary magazine. At the beginning of the year, however, there was no literary magazine, so I applied for and received a small grant of $400 from the Los Angeles Unified School District Small Grants Program to resurrect the school journal.

By that point we had studied models from literature, gained each other's trust, formed a cohesive group, and discussed the importance of rewriting. I had also offered them a goal and reward which went beyond the limitations of a mere assignment.

Next I prepared them for writing the autobiographical vignette by

giving them an in-class assignment of automatic writing for several days. They were to write as quickly as possible about some memory from their past without worrying about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. They included as many details related to the five senses as possible. If they had trouble remembering an incident, I asked them questions about their past to help them.

Once they had recorded their memory, I asked them to write a character sketch of the main character, other than themselves, in that remembrance. Before writing the sketches, we reviewed what constituted an interesting character: telling details, personality traits, conflicts, secrets, fears, mannerisms.

I allowed the students time in class to do a quick "garbage draft," one which no one else would see. The homework assignment was to finish what they had started in class. Then I gave them two days to rewrite, also partly in class. This procedure gave me time to go around the room and help each student individually in a relaxed atmosphere. For me, working individually with students is one of the joys of teaching.

When that first rewrite was completed, I broke the class into groups of four and asked them to read each other's work. This technique underscored the concept that they were not merely writing an assignment for the teacher, but writing for an audience, in this case, one another. Without the cohesiveness established from the interviews, however, students would have been reluctant to reveal their emotions. By now there was a strong feeling of trust established among all of us. I tried to break the groups down by both mastery of language and personality. I combined more gregarious students with those who were painfully shy, those skilled in language with those who needed remedial work.

In this first session of "read-arounds," I asked them to look for blatant mechanical and spelling errors. Many of my students still wrote "to" for "too," "wich" for "which," and "its" for "it's." They spelled as they spoke. Being mainly Spanish speakers, they tended to insert b's for v's. I also asked them to note passages they liked, sentences that confused them, and segments where they wanted to see more development.

After each student received comments from three classmates, rewriting began. Again, I incorporated class time for this step of the process. Some students needed a great deal of help; others worked efficiently. On the whole I had no trouble keeping them on task. Their homework was to rewrite at least one page per night.

After a few days I placed them back in their groups for another session of read-arounds. This time I asked them to note small mechanical and spelling errors, style, specificity of detail, and paragraphing.

I next assigned a dialogue exercise. I had students record an actual conversation, either in school or out, stressing that the people they were recording should not be aware of their presence.

The students liked this assignment, and the results were terrific. It made them aware of the natural rhythm of speech, and conditioned them to listen. By reading their dialogue segments to the class, the students learned that natural dialogue is spontaneous, charged with energy, and fragmented; it is also desultory, repetitive, and elliptical. Above all, the class learned that good dialogue is brief. Exchanges can be made with only a few words, with a single word, or sometimes with no words at all.

They then took their original characters and recreated the scene they had remembered during their sessions of automatic writing. The scene was to be something that moved the writer in some way.

Before the students wrote, however, I used the technique of clustering words on the board. To give them an idea of what emotion they could write about, I had my students cite words that expressed emotion. For examples, I elicited from them words such as sadness, anger, terror, laughter, nostalgia, amazement, regret, guilt, pity, and fear. The key is to draw these concepts from the students. If they are not forthcoming, the teacher can create situations which illustrate the word. For example: "how would you feel if you did something that hurt someone you loved, but you could never bring yourself to say you were sorry?" This particular example is charged with words such as guilt, regret, and anger. Clustering will help young writers determine the primary emotion they are trying to convey.

We also discussed catharsis - a concept they were familiar with after studying "Electra" the semester before. We recalled how fiction, both tragic and humorous, offers the reader - and the writer - the possibility of purging emotions.

Now they were finally ready to put their characters in a setting and recreate the scene taken from the memory they first conjured up during automatic writing. The vignettes had to incorporate both narrative and dialogue. I found it important to give students a clear idea of the assignment, to provide models, and to allow enough time to complete the task — but not too much. Otherwise, momentum would be lost. For this phase of the unit, I suggest no more than four days.

I set aside one day to allow students to talk about the experience, vent frustrations, ask questions. Since I believed my role was primarily as a guide to the creative process, I felt it was vital to keep communication open at all times. These sessions also served as story conferences. Then I gave the students another two days for read-arounds, two more

days for rewriting, and the project was nearly finished.

My final assignment was to have each student read his or her vignette to the class. A shy or insecure student could read another person's vignette, provided that student was a member of his or her group. Only a few selected this option.

The results were moving. The students were attentive and interested in each other's work, not only because they had become friends, but also because they had shared in the process of creation. All the vignettes were good to excellent. One student wrote how her father had banished her sister from the house when he found out she was pregnant; another told of an incident when she was in the hospital and made friends with a girl who died; another related the first day she spent in the United States and discovered she would no longer live in Mexico; yet another wrote how his friend dared him to jump into the river from a high bridge.

As a result of this extended process, the students learned to take pride in their work and discovered that the essence of writing is rewriting. Since they were writing to an audience of their peers, they were more careful about their work than they would have been if they were simply doing an assignment for the teacher. They learned to share their experiences, expose themselves, take risks.

The best vignettes were not necessarily written by those students who were the most gifted or possessed the best command of the language. One student, Gricelda, who was very quiet, had to work hard on her mechanics. But she was dedicated, willing to revise, and able to convey unusual sensitivity in her writing. In order to have her story published in *Local Stop*, the school literary magazine, she rewrote it at least four times after we finished the unit on creative writing.

Several others from the class submitted their work, which was also excellent, but not in time for the deadline. At least ten people in the class wanted to get involved in the literary magazine the following year. Students took pride in their writing. They learned how to communicate with one another in a way which was far more personal and constructive than if given an assignment to write a simple character sketch in a few days. They also discovered that they could learn from one another.

As a teacher, I learned that I functioned best when I served as a guide to the process: I was not there to act as sole arbiter of their work. The teaching of creative writing to high school students involves much more than a knowledge of the material and mechanics. It is essential to create the proper atmosphere of mutual trust, to use models from literature, and to give students adequate time to complete their projects. I suggest that the teacher adopt "read-around" and "clustering" tech-

niques, provide meaningful goals, and have the students share with the entire class what they have written.

The experience of teaching creative writing to high school students proved to be highly successful from the standpoint of teaching process, producing a product, and improving language skills. Beyond that, I became intimately involved in the inner lives of my students through their vignettes. I discovered new dimensions to their personalities and found myself more receptive to them. Because I served not as an authority figure but as a guide through the writing process, both my students and I were enriched.

Gricelda Santamaria's vignette is offered as an illustration of the work produced by the class and for your enjoyment.

"A Christmas Incident"

by

Gricelda Santa Maria

This incident remains with me for a year now. It was December 21, a windy, and very cold day. I was 13 years old and on Christmas Vacation. I was sitting on the floor of the livingroom next to the Christmas tree fixing presents. My father and two sisters went Christmas shopping. My mother and my oldest sister Tina (who was an 18 year old high school dropout) were in one of the bedrooms, arguing about something. Tina kept saying it was an accident. I stopped fixing the presents and just stood there. My mother started yelling, "What do you mean it was an accident?" I stood up and left the presents scattered on the floor. I tiptoed into the room and peeked through the key hole. I didn't see much because Tina was coming out of the room. I ran to the livingroom before she came out. I could hear Tina's footsteps. She went to the bathroom and she started crying.

When I went back to the bedroom, my mother was sitting on a wooden chair with her head in her hands. I looked at her wondering what happened. With her head still down she told me in a calm voice, "Close the door and leave." I closed the door slowly, looking at her. I stood outside the door for a moment, listening to my mother crying, and then went back to the living room. I sat on the floor with my legs crossed and stared at the T.V. screen. I heard Tina coming out of the bathroom. I got up and went to her. Her eyes were red. I asked her, "What happened?" She said nothing and went to the other bedroom.

That day my mother and Tina were silent. The next morning my mother and Tina were talking in our bedroom. I was asleep, but their talking woke me up. I pretended to be asleep. The covers were on top of my head and I peeped out of them. My mother asked Tina in a sad low voice, "When are you going to tell your father?" Squeezing a pillow in her arms, Tina shook her shoulders and responded, "I don't

know." I was wondering what she had to tell him.

My mother asked, "Are you going to keep the baby?" Tina waited a moment and then said, "Yes."

I was shocked. I didn't think Tina would do such a thing. My mother trusted her completely. The conversation went on, but I couldn't pay attention any more.

A short while later my mother left the room. I got up. Tina was surprised to see me. She didn't think I was listening. When I opened the door to leave she called my name. I didn't turn around. She said softly, "Did you hear?"

"Yes," I said.

"Don't tell anyone. I want to be the one to tell everyone the news."

My father and my brothers and sisters were in the kitchen eating breakfast. Tina was dipping a cookie very slowly up and down in her glass of milk. She started talking to my father. Little by little she told him she was pregnant. My father looked at her with disgust, got up and rushed out of the house. He didn't even finish his breakfast. Tina ran to the bedroom and started crying. I felt so sorry for her because I loved her so much. I didn't know what to do, cry with her or cry for her.

In the evening my father came back. He went to the livingroom and sat on the sofa. He wouldn't say anything. In a few minutes he got up from the sofa and went to Tina's room. He stood in the door way and told her, "Pack your stuff and leave this house." Tina phoned her boyfriend (she had been dating nearly four years) and told him to pick her up at the house. Her boyfriend arrived right away. He came in the house to talk to my parents. While Tina was packing, her boyfriend was telling my parents, "I'm sorry for what I done to your daughter. I'm going to marry her and take care of her." When Tina finished packing she told me, "Don't cry, I'll visit you sometimes." When she said that I started crying even more. She went to the livingroom where her boyfriend was waiting. She called his name and he came. He carried the suitcase to his car. Tina told everyone good-bye except my father. As she was walking to the car I looked at her through the window. I started to cry harder. I hated my father so much. I didn't care if I ever saw his face again. Every time I thought of Tina I started crying.

It was Christmas Day. We were eating dinner. The house felt lonely and empty. I hated that Christmas.

In the middle of June, Tina started getting stomach pains. Some days the pains would be really bad. She went to the hospital to have the baby, but the baby died because it was premature.

During that year I never forgave my father for throwing her out of the house. He would try to talk to me but I ignored him. He got mad and hit me. The more he hit me the angrier I felt towards him and the more I hated him.

On a hot July evening I was looking at T.V. My father came in and sat on the sofa next to me. I watched him from the corner of my eye. He kept staring at me. I turned to see him. A tear was rolling down his cheek. I turned away and got up to leave. He called my name. He got up and came to me. I could see the hurt in his eyes. He wiped his tear and cleared his throat.

"Please talk to me. I'm sorry for the pain and hurt I caused you and your sister," he said in a gentle voice.

"I'm not going to talk to you even if you get on your knees," I said angrily. "What you did was inexcusable. I don't think I'll ever get myself to forgive you."

He looked sadder now.

"Why did you do this to me? Make me suffer so much? Do you know how it feels when your daughter that you love so much won't talk to you or look at you?" Tears rushed down his chin onto his shirt.

"What do you mean, why do I make you suffer so much? You're the one that made me suffer when you told Tina to get out of the house. How do you think I felt? I felt as if someone made a hole in my chest, took my heart and tore it into shreds." I felt a tear coming down my cheek, so I wiped it off right away.

The next thing I knew he embraced me. "Let me go! I hate you!" I said screaming at him. I bit his arm as hard as I could to make him release me. He still wouldn't let me go. He tightened his hold on me. "Just listen to me!" He said. "I love you and I always will. I'm sorry for what I done to Tina. Don't you think you punished me enough? Don't you think that it hurts down deep inside? If I could I would change what I done, but I can't. I have to live with that mistake for the rest of my life. Please forgive me."

I thought to myself that if he wasn't sorry for what he did, he wouldn't be crying so much for forgiveness.

"Let me go so that I can say what I want to say to you," I said.

He finally released me. I wiped away my tears, and so did he.

"I'll forgive you for what you done," I said. "But I will never like what you did."

Then I left the room.

What Is Your Permanent Address?

by
Ruth Whitman

There was a time when I seemed to be spending my life filling out application forms and questionnaires for grants, fellowships, and jobs. My children were applying to colleges and needed my help in filling out their applications. Day and night we were writing bits and fragments of our lives onto those small white spaces provided for salient facts. But the facts seemed to me less and less salient. At night I dreamed of filling out questionnaires . One morning I woke up and said, "All these categories can really be reduced to five or six basic questions to which one never gives the true answer. I'm going to write a questionnaire where I finally tell the truth — not necessarily the mundane facts, but the truth. Here is my questionnaire:

A QUESTIONNAIRE

Describe your early education.

At six, standing on the low stone wall
beside my grandfather, I was taller than he.
Wearing my white beret, hair cut short,
with leather leggings to my knee, I put my hand
on his shoulder possessively
and sang him his lullaby, *a moloch veynt*,
an angel weeps, an angel weeps.

What is your permanent address.

A flat rock in Central Park
where an innocent policeman
found me with my first sweetheart.
Under Cambridge clocks chiming each quarter hour.
Beside the sea.
Beneath Mount Zion.
On Boston's broad Victorian bosom.
Across the pond where you are standing, laughing at me.

Male or female.

Both. When I saw the Greek Hermaphrodite
I recognized myself and you, each
two in one. Now I know why

the Masai warriors grow brave
by drinking blood and milk.

Are you married.

Yes, many times.
I marry my first loves
over and over. Like coming home.

Describe a crucial event in your life.

At twenty, I died and was born again. For a while
I died every day. One day when I was dying
beside the sea, which ignored me,
when my guts ran empty and I started sinking
into that bottomless hollow
beneath the bed, I suddenly heard
(through the window, in my head)
the notes of the *Appassionata*
calling me back into the world.

List your awards and honors.

Three children.
One, a yellow tearose.
Two, a winedark peony.
Three, a young fox, heart's desire.

Give a brief statement of your plans.

To fly.
To swim across the pond.
To tell what I know.
To love you harder.

I then discovered, after the poem was published in an anthology, that some teachers were using it as an assignment in their workshops. I could see that asking a fundamental matter-of-fact question about life or experience, without expecting a factual answer, might provoke some surprises.

This device is different from writing a rhetorical question, which does not expect an answer. I often warn my students against asking a purely rhetorical question in a poem. Unless the question is very strong and has been well prepared for, it usually sounds lame and abstract. But a question that expects — and receives — an answer is a different matter. It is stimulating; it is mind-opening; it gives an opportunity to reach towards unexpected metaphor. There is a dramatic movement between question and answer: expectation followed by satisfaction. By the end of

the poem, readers are often left with information far more profound than they had anticipated.

Take, for instance, Denise Levertov's "What Were They Like?" She asks her six questions all at once so that the eye has to refer back in reading the six answers, rather than alternating between question and answer. The device achieves a cumulative effect; in this case, the innocence of the initial questions becomes the bitter experience of the final answer: "It is silent now."

Of all the political poems written in recent years about the Vietnam War, or for that matter, any war, I believe this is one of the most moving and successful, precisely because it is written tangentially, in the guise of a questionnaire. It takes the reader unaware. It gives Levertov the chance to say things that the reader is especially eager to hear because of the psychological expectation set up by the form.

1) Did the people of Vietnam
use lanterns of stone?
2) Did they hold ceremonies
to reverence the opening of buds?
3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
4) Did they use bone and ivory,
jade and silver, for ornament?
5) Had they an epic poem?
6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after the children were killed
there were no more buds.
3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.
4) A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.
All the bones were charred.
5) It is not remembered. Remember, most were peasants; their life
was in rice and bamboo.
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
When bombs smashed those mirrors
there was time only to scream
6) There is no echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled

the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.

This is an excellent example of the latitude the form allows the poet; it is possible in this guise to make difficult statements and to make them convincing and moving.

A more personal questionnaire has equal latitude. At the same time, it stimulates those special images of intimate memory and experience that comprise some of the profoundest sources of poetry-making. When I talk about the questionnaire form in class, I make it clear that it is not necessary to answer all my questions or even to repeat the same questions. My questionnaire is merely a paradigm. If the students have other more pertinent questions they would rather answer, I tell them, by all means ask them and answer them.

One student wrote this questionnaire:

Your birthdate.

I was born a thought,
An amusing disturbance.
In a hot summer night,
I, a labor, came to be
After the crowds
Had drained the city.

Male or Female.

Outside or in?
What I do in the presence of others?
Or what I see by myself?
You ask my gender, who are you that ask?
When I know this,
Then and only then
Shall I tell.

Describe a crucial event in your life.

When I was sixteen I broke my father's heart.
My dreams of the boys of summer

Died and were buried in the sandlot.

My father's heart survived;

I cried.

My tears scattered the dust

That hangs now beneath my father's eyes.

Another wrote:

Describe your early education.

A bat with wooden wings flying end over end swooping low to find a place on my skull.

A crowded room with bunk beds full of boys who grew old too fast and ruined the fun.

A stern well-dressed man in a bright white Mercedes who drove away breaking my legs under his wheels.

A love so sweet the transparent fringes of my soul disappeared into soft tear-stained flesh.

All in all an imperfect peace, and I, a man hunting for a flower amidst the weeds, have not yet finished.

Give a brief statement of your plans.

to finish my early education and find this small sparkling flower.

Another student, Jaime, wrote:

Describe your early education.

My mother washed the dishes to "Red Roses for a Blue Lady,"

my father read the *Times*,

while I wove cat's cradles

soundlessly stringing melodies.

Have we met?

Many times.

Deja vu.

There, in the mirror that absorbs you,

I hold you in the darkness of my eyes.

There too, in the water shadows

I smile beneath your overhanging hair,

rippling in delight to greet you.

List your awards and honors.

A sister, who is a psalm of joy.

A first love, who has lingered.

A God, who is.

Give a brief statement of your plans.

To elope with life.

To celebrate, and leave the Christmas lights up

all year long.

To open. Then,

remain open.

There are other question poems in our literature that have no answers or only implied answers. These questions are not rhetorical, but they are not completed statements either. One is Douglas Lawder's "Final Examination for English 300B Advanced Poetry Writing (A Take-Home Final)." My favorite question is:

2. Which of the following is prose, which poetry?
   a) green grass
   b) green
   Explain.

It is a delightful poem, poking fun at exams, at critics, at poems about poetry. The device of asking questions for which an answer is expected, but not giving the answer, has a humorous and satiric effect.

Another poem I think of in the *genus* Questionnaire is Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant," which begins as a bitter satire about marriage:

First, are you our sort of person?

Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,

A brace or a hook,

Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch. . . .

and ends sarcastically with:

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

A final question without a question mark is effective because it forces the reader's attention.

W. S. Merwin's question and answer poem, "Some Last Questions," takes the form almost as far as it can go in the direction of hearing a real voice in a surreal inquiry. It is a metaphysical interrogation:

SOME LAST QUESTIONS

What is the head

A. Ash

What are the eyes

A. The wells have fallen in and have

Inhabitants

What are the feet

A. Thumbs left after the auction

No what are the feet

A. Under them the impossible road is moving

Down which the broken necked mice push

Balls of blood with their noses

What is the tongue

A. The black coat that fell off the wall

With sleeves trying to say something

What are the hands

A. Paid

No what are the hands

A. Climbing back down the museum wall

To their ancestors the extinct shrews that will

Have left a message

What is the silence

A. As though it had a right to more

Who are the compatriots

A. They make the stars of bone

Clearly the form is a vessel that can hold any material. It can change its shape to accommodate any subject. Yet the form, like all controlling forms, is a wonderful stimulus. As one of my students wrote: "I found that the limits of the form freed me to say the things I wanted to say." This is one of those moments that every teacher hopes for, the moment when a young poet discovers that structure bestows freedom.

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A Wilderness with a Map: Teaching the First Course in Creative Writing

by
Philip St. Clair

They want a wilderness with a map —
but how about errors that give a new start?
—
or leaves that are edging into the light? —
or the many places a road can't find?
— William Stafford (65)

After experiencing a number of university writing workshops on the undergraduate and graduate level, I finally had an opportunity to lead one of my own: English 208, Introduction to Creative Writing. At first thought, the task seemed formidable: the average student who registered for the course had never taken any literature courses; their writing experience, in most cases, was limited to high school and freshman composition. How, then, was I to design a course that would, in the space of one semester, expose them to basic literary conventions, provide a forum for their writing, and, most importantly, implement and encourage the evaluation of their own work and the work of their peers? And what was *my* role in all of this?

The nature of the course suggested that the semester be divided into four equal parts, and since the transition from fiction to poetry seemed the most logical for the beginning student, I roughed out the course as follows: fiction study, fiction workshop, poetry study, poetry workshop. That teaching experience has shown me that the duties of the instructors in courses like it are also fourfold: they must establish and maintain a proper atmosphere; they must guide their students through texts and terms; they must lead workshops and help foster criticism; and they must give a fair and thorough evaluation of student performance.

Atmosphere - The Instructor's Role

As a rule, beginning writers overreact to rejection — whether by peers, instructors, or publishers. The quickest and most effective way to discourage these early efforts is by exposure to a contentious and hostile workshop environment. Thus the first duty of the workshop leader is to

set a friendly tone, and the best way to do that is by example. Response to the work at hand should be honest and enthusiastic; criticism must be gentle and well-reasoned, and always tempered with praise. In addition, instructors should insist that student criticism be polite, constructive and rational — one aspect of the workshop experience is the development of critical faculties, and no participant should be permitted to state "I hate this" or "I like this" without justifying their opinion. Needless to say, the brash, opinionated student who takes delight in slashing to ribbons the work of classmates ought to be prohibited from doing so. In short, the leader must provide an atmosphere in which to *make mistakes*. This is not to say that beginning workshops should be free of negative comments — quite the contrary. Paul Engle believes that the competition and criticism found in workshops contributes to the personal development of the writer:

> In the process of original writing, every word and every attitude is subject to a constant scrutiny, or should be, and much of what we do is to heighten the sense of awareness which this requires. We knock, or persuade, or terrify, the false tenderness toward his own work out of the beginning writer. This is the beginning of wisdom (Wilbers 132).

Engle's comments, while perhaps extreme for a beginning course, illustrate the necessity of developing distance and clearsightedness toward one's own work — a concept that must be learned as early as possible.

Through no fault of their own, the most well-intentioned workshop leaders can restrict student development simply by being authority figures who unavoidably cast long shadows of influence. Richard Hugo, realizing this danger, comments that "if he is worth a damn, any poet teaching poetry writing constantly and often without knowing it is saying to the student, 'Write the way I do. That's the best sound you can make' "(29). Although some influence is unavoidable, workshop leaders must constantly encourage and reinforce intellectual and creative independence. Hugo often makes the following remarks to his beginning poetry-writing class:

> You'll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment I am, without wanting to or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write. At all times keep your crap detector on. If what I say is of no help, let it go. Don't start arguments. They are futile and take us away from our purpose. As Yeats noted, your important arguments are with yourself (3).

Perhaps the most effective way for the instructor to encourage creativity and risk-taking is to assume the role of reader/editor instead of reviewer/critic. To borrow concepts from Theodore Morrison and John Ciardi, the workshop leader should be a writing coach and a "hired sympathy" (Library of Congress 16, 39). The first of Theodore Roethke's three pieces of advice to writing instructors is:

> Establish a rapport, get a sense of communication with the whole class — and quickly . . . . It means keeping as many antennae out as possible, keeping oneself "open," aware of everyone, not just the two or three best (52-53).

Much of the time, the critic responds to a piece in a state of isolation from the author, unaware of processes or problems, insisting that the work stand on its own merits on the page as product. For better or worse, the workshop leader does not have that luxury — he or she is exposed to ideas, predrafts and drafts, false starts, and blind alleys. In view of this, it is impossible for the sympathetic writing teacher to be a critic — *process* must be stressed over *product*, and this reinforces the concept of workshop as a safe place to make mistakes. Mina Shaughnessy observes that:

> concern with process merges easily with the third pedagogical problem — *that the student lacks confidence in himself in academic situations and fears that writing will not only expose but magnify his inadequacies*. Such a feeling is antithetical to the impulse that leads people to write (85).

Beginning creative writing students should be constantly reminded that the workshop is a forum for works-in-progress rather than a showcase for finished pieces. These reassurances will help make this experience more congenial.

On the other hand, it is possible to be *too* reassuring, and the workshop leader should avoid overlavish (and often insincere) praise. Theodore Morrison, former director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, believes that "there ought to be a sign . . . saying, 'Encouragement ahead, pass at your own risk' " (Library of Congress 14). George Garrett would rather not address the question at all:

> Should we encourage or discourage in terms of talent? I don't really think that's our function. My feeling is that we must not lie and perpetuate and continue false illusions about fame, riches, or even happiness or virtue in connection with writing . . . it is a free choice of the individual (Library of Congress 13-14).

The first course in creative writing is designed to display possibilities rather than produce writers; any instructor who urges the beginning stu-

dent to a full-time career in writing will most likely be doing a grave disservice. Encouragment, if given at all, should be low-key and realistic — for example, students should be advised to send their first work to the campus literary magazine instead of *The New Yorker* or *Paris Review*.

Atmosphere - The Students' Role

Mina Shaughnessy observes that writing is a social act (83); the direct ancestors of university-sponsored workshops were the 'writing clubs' that sprang up on many campuses a hundred years ago (Wilbers 19 ff). Today, the social aspect of the workshop remains as one of the better memories for creative writing program veterans.

The first duty of the workshop leader is to establish a congenial tone. But the leader must also control the atmosphere, and perhaps the best way to do that is to make socially acceptable interaction between participants a course requirement. On the first day of class, I distributed information that included the following statement:

> I have a low tolerance for poor spelling, grammar, punctuation, and laziness. I have *no* tolerance for people who are vicious and abrasive when criticizing the work of others, and I will cheerfully fail anyone who does so.

This reminiscence by a former member of the Iowa graduate workshop is an excellent example — albeit extreme — of what *not* to tolerate:

> I remember a short story by Gail Godwin, probably the best-known of my peers at Iowa. It has a tramp in it who rapes an American librarian in London. The men in the class were tearing the story up, particularly critical of the tramp. (One female workshop member) said, "Well, I thought the tramp *qua* tramp was *very* well drawn." A male voice came back in imitation, "I thought the tramp *qua* tramp was shit *qua* shit" (Wilbers 130).

In a class of inexperienced students, comments of any nature are often difficult to elicit. Again, the fear of failure can have an effect on student response. A method I found helpful was to require each student to write brief comments on 3 x 5 cards — one card for what they liked about a piece, another for what they disliked. They were also asked to sign them and have them ready before each text-discussion session. When I detected a lull in response, I would read comments from some of the cards, being careful not to divulge the name of the respondent. This procedure worked well: it enabled students to voice comments in a risk-free manner; it provided another factor in the end-of-term evaluation process; and it often gave direction to class discussions.

Texts, Terms, and Techniques

For most students, the beginning workshop is the first exposure to creative writing as a discipline. Therefore, the most important function of a creative writing text is as a definer and explicator of terms and techniques. It is essential that students learn and use these tools, for they provide possibilities for their own work and constitute the language of workshop criticism.

Since the all-important term and technique definitions are text-based, they should be written by a contemporary author who is an effective communicator. The tone should be fairly light and informal so that the reader is not alienated by lackluster examples, pompous attitudes, or overblown prose; the information should be thorough without being incomprehensible. It should also contain a generous amount of advice based on personal experience — the right word in the right circumstances might save the beginner a great deal of time. Those instructors seeking suitable texts would do well to read David Kirby's critique of current offerings.

Another feature of a good text is an ample, thorough anthology reflecting the best of traditional and contemporary writing. Ideally, anthology selections ought to be keyed to each chapter: for example, material explaining the strategies of plotting should be counterpointed by a short story containing well-defined dramatic action.

Anthologies also provide examples for practical criticism. They enable students to develop and express their critical senses before the workshop sessions begin. As early as possible, students should be disabused of the concept that the printed page is an unassailable icon — even the best writers produce the occasional flat, unmusical line in a poem or a slow place in the action of a short story, and beginning writers should begin using their instincts and their arsenal of terms to point these out. The instructor can help in this process by asking for opinions about possible problem areas of a text, and this might be done informally: "When I read this poem, I had some trouble with the second line in the third stanza — all those 'S' sounds seemed overdone to me. Did anyone else have the same reaction, or is it just me?" One of Roethke's pieces of advice to writing teachers is that they should "wear learning as lightly as possible" (51). Classroom informality helps achieve this effect.

During the first week of class, I also distributed a list of terms used in fiction and poetry — terms I thought would be most useful to the beginning writers (see Table 1). This list was helpful in three ways: it served as a guide for the classroom element of the course; it helped students prepare for the two examinations; and it formed the basis for a series of one- and two-page weekly assignments stressing technique.

Fiction

allegory
atmosphere

conceit
conflict
crisis

distance

epiphany
epistolary novel

first person
Freitag's pyramid

interior monologue
irony

metaphor

objective author
omniscient author

pathetic fallacy
point of view
polemic
plot
propaganda

resolution

scene
second person
simile
story
stream of consciousness
summary
symbol

theme
third person
tone

Poetry

accent
alliteration
ambiguity
anapest
assonance

caesura
cliche
closed form
closed stanza
concrete poetry
content
couplet

dactyl
dimeter
double iamb
dramatic irony
dramatic monologue
dropped line

end-stopped free verse
end-stopped line
enjambment
euphemism

feminine ending
fluid form
foot
form
free verse

haiku
heptameter
hexameter
hyperbole

iamb
inspiration
internal rhyme
inversion

line break

metaphor
meter
mixed metaphor
monometer

obscurity
off or slant rhyme
onomatopoeia
open form
open stanza
overstatement

entameter
personae
personification
prose poem

quatrain

refrain
rhyme
rhythm
run-on free verse

scansion
sentimentality
simile
situational irony
solid form
sonnet
spatial free verse
spondee
stanza
substitution
surrealism

tenor (of metaphor)
texture
theme
trimeter
triplet (tercet)
trochee

understatement

vehicle (of metaphor)
verse
villanelle

Figure 1. Suggested Terms

Some of these brief projects were designed to give students practice in using forms and techniques they might not have attempted on their own, such as writing pairs of couplets with a specified meter and rhyme scheme, a narrative poem, an imagistic poem (haiku), nonsense verse, and rendering prose into poetry (three paragraphs from Melville's *Moby Dick*). On one occasion, three weekly assignments formed a related sequence. First, I required students to describe a setting carefully — whether real or imagined. For the week after, I had them invent or describe a character, reminding them to include psychological as well as physical traits. During the third week, they were to place the character within the scene, establish a point of view, and then describe what would happen.

A wide range of short assignments is a good response to Roethke's third bit of advice to the writing teacher: "Vary the pace, the attack, the methods of approach . . . . It's well to remember that even the most fervent can't endure intense lyric poetry all the time; that a class can be a dance, but a course is not a dance marathon . . ." (55). More importantly, this combination of term-learning and term-related exercise helps in the resolution of Mina Shaughnessy's first pedagogical problem:

> . . . *the inexperienced writer is indeed not likely to have command of the language he needs to bring off the consolidations that are called for in writing.* If . . . writing presses the writer toward greater explicitness than he would require of himself in speech, and if that explicitness is realized through various types of consolidations — syntactic and semantic — the person who has done little writing may not be able to use some or many of the forms that facilitate consolidation (73).

Workshop

In addition to a congenial atmosphere, students must be exposed to the fact that writing — especially creative writing — is almost always a circular process, requiring many revisions before the finished piece. A good technique to illustrate this is to bring in rough drafts (either the instructor's work or photocopies of the work of others) by way of an object lesson. Students are usually impressed and astonished by the fact that a single poem by Dylan Thomas was often a product of fifty to sixty drafts.

Another helpful aid to explain the concept of revision is to tell students that revision means "re-seeing," and that this process is continuous. A diagram of this circular process is shown by Figure 2, and students should be led through it step by step. Of particular importance are the concepts of discrimination, dissonance, and tension — those irritations in the oyster shell that eventually become pearls. If students are to

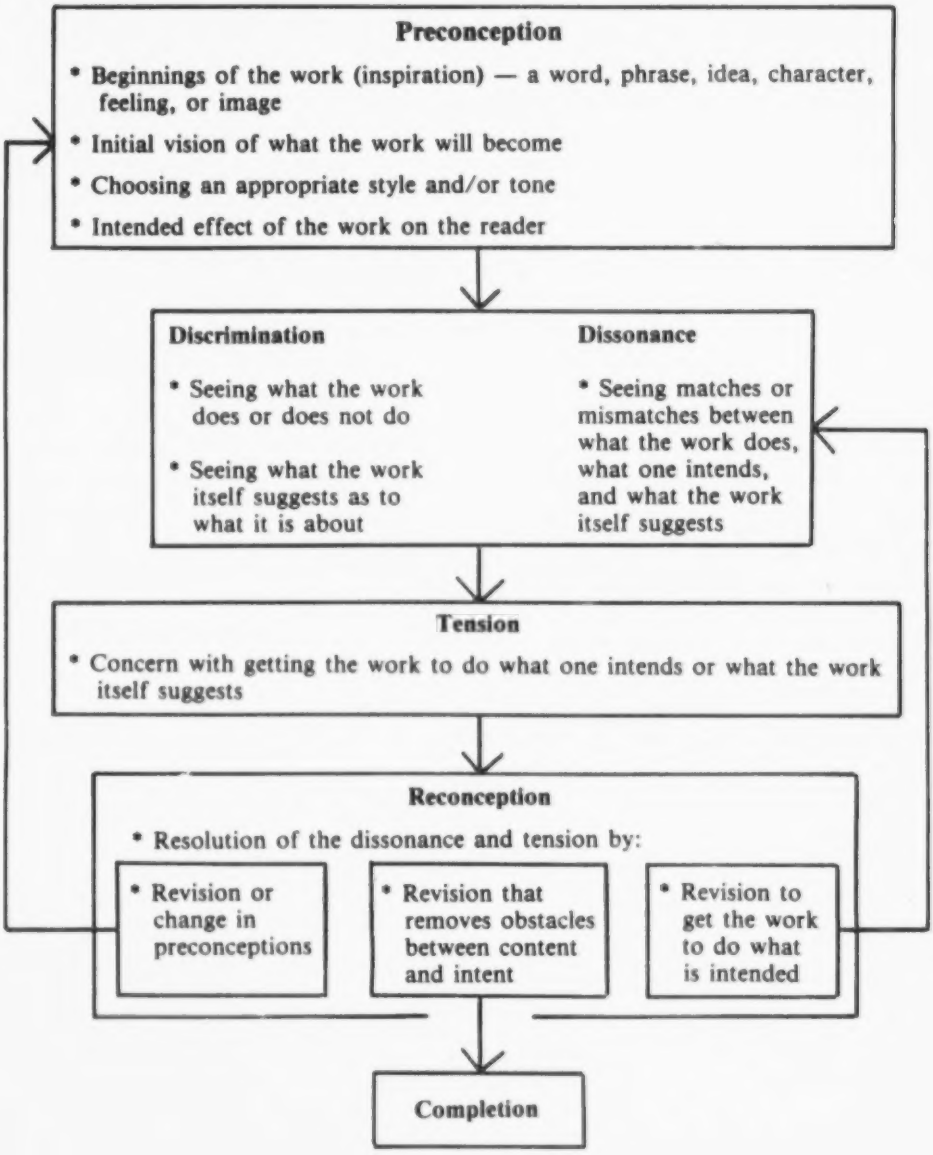
Preconception
• Beginnings of the work (inspiration) — a word, phrase, idea, character, feeling, or image
• Initial vision of what the work will become
• Choosing an appropriate style and/or tone
• Intended effect of the work on the reader
Discrimination
• Seeing what the work does or does not do
• Seeing what the work itself suggests as to what it is about
Dissonance
• Seeing matches or mismatches between what the work does, what one intends, and what the work itself suggests
Tension
• Concern with getting the work to do what one intends or what the work itself suggests
Reconception
• Resolution of the dissonance and tension by:
• Revision or change in preconceptions
• Revision that removes obstacles between content and intent
• Revision to get the work to do what is intended
Completion

Figure 3. A Circular Model of the Process of Writing-as-Revision (adapted from Della-Piana 107).

be encouraged to trust their instincts regarding the work of others, then it follows that they ought to be able to apply them to their own. Admittedly, this is not an easy technique to learn, but by practicing criticism in a controlled situation, the student will begin to develop the proper distance necessary to evaluate his or her own work.

In a workshop situation, the participant is forced into becoming student-as-writer and student-as-critic. At first glance, the beginner might view the combination of these roles as antithetical — perhaps even paradoxical. However, once the student understands the circular concept of revision and has a good sense of critical terminology — and this includes the idea of distance — the two roles merge, becoming a naturally recursive process that helps to resolve Mina Shaughnessy's second pedagogical problem:

> . . . *the beginning writer does not know how writers behave*. . . the skill of objectifying a statement, of looking at it, changing it by additions, subtractions, substitutions, or inversions, taking the time to get as close a fit as possible between what he means and what he says on paper. Writers who are not aware of this tend to think that the point in writing is to get everything right the first time and that the need to change things is a mark of the amateur (79).

As in the text-oriented modes, instructors often have problems in eliciting comments from students in workshops. One method used is the scheduling of respondents (or groups of three or four) to give an informal oral presentation immediately after a piece has been presented in workshop. Following the examples set by the instructor (and using their knowledge of critical terms), the respondents should start with broad rhetorical issues (such as conflict, crisis, resolution, trope, pacing) and then narrow their scrutiny to finer points (syntax, spelling, stanza and line breaks). Written response is another alternative, and one form can be comments noted in the margins of copies of the work presented. These are given to the student at the end of class.

Rubric sheets (Figure 3) are helpful in generating criticism because they aid students in formulating opinions, narrowing reactions, and internalizing critical terms. This tool should be introduced early in the course. One method of doing this is to hand out examples of student writing and then ask the class to try marking the sheets by way of response, reminding them to use the right-hand side of the sheet for elaborative commentary. After the students have finished, the instructor collects them and establishes a consensus, inserting his or her own observations as necessary. A few practice sessions with the rubric should be enough to enable students to generate commentary for the workshop mode.

CREATIVE WRITING RUBRIC

FICTION:

Power changes
- —clarity problems
- —inaccuracy of expression
- —weak force of argument
- —word choice
- —weak images
- —faulty pacing
- —cliche
- —redundancy:
  - —concepts/images
  - —words/phrases
- —weak conflict
- —weak crisis
- —weak resolution
- —other

Structural alterations
- —inappropriate point of view
- —inappropriate action
- —inappropriate dialogue
- —pathetic fallacy
- —sentimentality
- —obscurity
- —overstatement
- —other

Mechanics
- —syntax
- —spelling
- —punctuation
- —typos
- —other

POETRY:

Power changes
- —clarity problems
- —inaccuracy of expression
- —weak force of argument
- —word choice
- —weak images
- —faulty pacing
- —cliche
- —redundancy:
  - —concepts/images
  - —words/phrases
- —faulty rhyme
- —inconsistent/broken meter
- —stanza breaks
- —line breaks
- —other

Structural alterations
- —weak mix of sound and sense
- —pathetic fallacy
- —sentimentality
- —obscurity
- —overstatement
- —other

Mechanics
- —syntax
- —spelling
- —punctuation
- —typos
- —other

Figure 3. Creative Writing Rubric (based on Hildick and Della-Piana Della-Piana 125-26).

One of the more interesting possibilities for student response is Robert J. Denn's adaptation of the Delphi Technique, first developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1960s. In essence, the Delphi Technique is a process whereby participants arrive at a group opinion by writing, rather than by formal, time-consuming meetings. Denn, who uses his version of the process in freshman composition classes, describes it as follows (italics mine):

> *In class*, students exchange drafts with one another and carefully read each other's work. As they read, they note their reactions to the essay in the margins, keying their reactions to broad rhetorical considerations like content, focus, organization, and development. When they finish reading an essay, they append a note in which they make specific suggestions for improvement. As soon as a student finishes reading and responding to a draft, he or she shops around for someone else who has just finished; these two exchange drafts and continue reading. Again students make comments and suggestions, *but beginning with this second round their responses are influenced by the responses of those who have read the draft previously*. In the course of a fifty-minute class period, each student can read and respond to three or four first drafts.
>
> At the end of class, drafts are returned to their authors. Each student then takes his or her paper home to consider what other students thought and to revise and rewrite it for the next class period (141-42).

One drawback to this system is that is it time-consuming — especially in a class as large as twenty or twenty-five — and therefore unsuitable for use during every workshop session. However, such a process might serve as a comfortable transition or pre-workshop between the lecture/text mode and the workshop mode. A few days using the Delphi Technique with the rubric sheets would acclimate students to a new set of critical tools in a no-risk situation.

Evaluation

Formal evaluation of a student's performance may pose problems for the instructor because it requires a shift in point of view. The reader/editor must somehow become a reviewer/critic without violating the tone of the course. Below are four techniques I found helpful:

1. I graded the final portfolio as a reflection of an individual's improvement, effort, and imagination. Although I tried to retain the idea that the work was still in progress, I was intolerant of typos, spelling and syntax errors

(unless clearly deliberate), and overall sloppiness. I used drafts and workshop presentations only as a benchmark to gauge progress, and I never attempted to grade them.

2. I marked the weekly projects and the 3 x 5 cards with the following symbols: ✓+ (for original and/or energetic response), ✓ (for average response), and — (for the misread assignment or no response at all). This process gave me the sense that the weekly projects were a sort of "required draft" that would not unduly skew the final grade.

3. In an attempt to be fair while planning examinations, I only included those terms on the sheet I handed out during the first week. When I presented poems or short stories as subjects for brief critical essay questions, I made sure that they contained clear examples of the concept or term being tested. For each examination, I asked ten definition questions (worth five points each) and five essay questions (worth ten points each).

4. Although the final portfolio constituted the largest portion of the final grade (I suggest 60 percent), the number of pieces in it were relatively few (one short story of at least six double-spaced pages and five or six poems *or* two short stories and three or four poems). The weekly projects stood for 10 percent of the final grade, the two examinations 10 percent each and a daily grade (a catch-all that might include cards, attendance, class response, and overall attitude) to represent the final 10 percent.

* * *

While the "first course" is not designed to produce writers, it can function as an excellent counterpoint to traditional composition classes. It can also reinforce the importance of revision while giving free rein to a student's creative instincts. Finally, for student and instructor alike, it's often a most entertaining experience.

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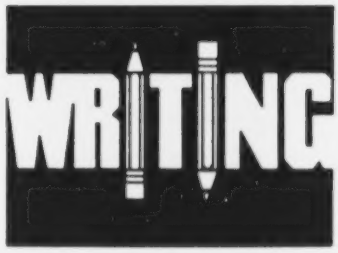
There's WORK to be done!



Writing has not yet become one of the success stories of American education. NAEP trend data show that, despite a rebound between 1979 and 1984, the writing skills of the nation's 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students were no better in 1984 than they were 10 years earlier. Consider the key findings:

- In 1984, 80 percent of in-school 17-year-olds could not write an adequate persuasive letter.*
- When 13- and 17-year-old students were asked to present information or engage in imaginative writing, large proportions (between 60 percent and 83 percent) performed inadequately.
- In the 1984 survey, 17-year-old students reported writing an average of about four essays and reports for all their subjects during the previous six weeks, while 13-year-olds averaged three papers across all subjects, about the same amount as a decade ago.

There is also encouraging news in NAEP's *Writing Trends Across the Decade, 1974-84*, which reports findings from 1974, 1979, and 1984 surveys that involved roughly 95,000 students:

- The trend lines since 1979 show improvement, particularly in the performance of 13- and 17-year-olds on informative and persuasive writing tasks; 9-year-olds improved on an imaginative writing task.
- 17-year-old students report schools were paying more attention to writing instruction in 1984 than was reported a decade earlier.
- Both 13- and 17-year-old participants were spending more time planning, rewriting, and considering teacher suggestions for improving their papers.
- Although few students can perform at an adequate level, fulfilling all requirements of a given task, substantial numbers of student responses were at the minimal level or better (between 56 and 89 percent on an informative task, between 34 and 64 percent on differing persuasive tasks, and between 55 and 75 percent on an imaginative task).*

COMMENTARY "This important report shows that the second of the three R's is in appallingly poor shape among American young people. The reform movement that has begun to show real progress in reading had best now begin to pay some close attention to writing."—**William Bennett, U.S. Education Secretary**

"We learn to write by writing. Constant practice, supplemented by informed and individualized instruction, is the critical formula. We have to face the fact that large classes make this kind of instruction virtually impossible. The disappointing results of the 1984 National Assessment declare a need for radical action now. Without improved conditions for teaching writing there is little hope for improvement in the future."—**John C. Maxwell, Executive Director, National Council of Teachers of English**

"By their own reports, students do little writing in school, averaging only three or four papers over a six-week period across all their subjects. Simply writing more, in some generalized sense, however, may be insufficient to bring about significant improvements in writing performance. To move beyond the current levels of achievement, a more systematic program of instruction may be needed—one focused more directly on the variety of different kinds of writing students need to learn to do and spanning a wider range of levels of complexity."—***Writing Trends Across the Decade, 1974-84***

* The words "adequate" and "minimal" are used as ratings to describe the students' success in accomplishing specific writing tasks. A NAEPGRAM is not a technical description of NAEP findings. For a full description of the data, along with scoring details and supporting charts, see *Writing Trends Across the Decade, 1974-84* (1986), available from NAEP, CN 6710, Princeton, NJ 08541-6710; (1-800) 223-0267.

Gail Godwin's *The Finishing School*: A Contemporary Link to the Classic and the Moral

by Joyce Dyer

Although most of us would perhaps like to pretend that we spend our leisure time reading with Dickens, Byron, and Fielding, the truth is that we probably don't. At least not all of it. We are conscientious throughout the year in our preparation of lessons over the "classics," and genuinely enjoy introducing great names and great books to our students. But do most of us honestly spend all our summer months rereading *Middlemarch* and *Our Mutual Friend?*

One of the things we can't overlook as teachers is our responsibility to help our students make decisions about contemporary fiction: the kind of reading they, like us, "really" will do after graduation. We must teach them ways to determine their selections other than the best-seller lists found taped to the bookshelves of America's drugstores and discount houses. Good habits can be encouraged such as reading the New York *Times* Book Review section on Sunday mornings, scanning book comments composed by reputable critics in journals like *The New Yorker, New Republic*, and *The New York Review of Books*, and browsing through contemporary fiction displays in school and local libraries.

The most direct and perhaps influential way we can expose our students to new fiction, however, is in our assignment of contemporary novels over the year. I think it's very unfortunate that we too often are made to feel "guilty" about selecting fiction written before a certain date — 1970, 1960, some of us even 1940 (the supposed line of demarcation between "modern" and "contemporary" literature). All great works, obviously, were once "contemporary." Why can't we, as skilled professionals, make guesses about the "great" works of the future? Why aren't we, as believers in youth, committed to promoting the potential of our students' culture as well as the culture of the past?

Gail Godwin's latest novel, *The Finishing School*, is a work that inspires confidence in contemporary American fiction. It is supremely teachable, adored by students, and as instructive about literature and the literary tradition as many better-established, earlier works might be.

For example, I have never taught a book that more successfully introduced the concepts of romanticism and tragedy to young readers. In this work, Godwin adopts the convention of the memoir. Justin Stokes, her androgynously-named middle-aged narrator, remembers what happened to her the summer she turned 14 and met her 44-year-old friend, Ursula DeVane. We quickly understand that the young Justin, recently forced by unfortunate circumstances to move from Fredricksburg, Virginia, to Clove, New York, has a romantic sensibility. She rejects the Raspberry Ice paint in her room at Aunt Mona's house, as well as the conventional milkmaids that threaten to draw her into the wallpaper and fabric skirts. She rejects the houses at Lucas Meadows, the housing development where Aunt Mona resides. They seem "designed to make everybody as alike as possble." The colors and floor plans are identical; the lamps in the living room windows are the same, down to the cellophane that tightly holds their shades and permanently frees them from dirt. Instead, Justin embraces the romantic dwelling of Ursula and her sensitive, musical brother Julian. A half-ruined stone hut and an old, mysterious Huguenot house catch her imagination and keep her pedalling from Lucas Meadows to Old Clove Road.

Statements sorted through the more-mature consciousness of an older Justin at times help us with the necessary distinction between the romantic and the real. In Chapter 5 Justin produces this fine sentence: "For most of that summer I would be divided, commuting between prosaic Lucas Meadows and seductive Old Clove Road, making an effort — which got harder as the summer progressed — to render unto the Stokes-Mott world, with its practicalities and family duties, what it required of me, while secretly preserving my highest loyalities for the DeVane kingdom, with its long-standing prides and alienations, its private fantasies, and its obsessive dreams."

The novel also helps present the ideas of mystery and the Gothic. Urgent questions compel readers to the very end: Why was Ida DeVane taken off to a mental institution? Why did Julian stay in Argentina so long after the war was over? What function did the meat hook in the office play in the last tragic scenario? Why does Julian despise Abel Cristiana? How had Ursula betrayed her mother? And finally, what part had Justin Stokes played in the last tragic hours of the summer that makes her feel guilty to this day, twenty-six years after the fact? All of these questions are intensified by their association with a desolate, remote setting, grotesque detail, and a dark sense of gloom and half-light.

The Finishing School lends itself to an examination of so many other literary matters: the complicated narrative and point of view decisions that foster suspense and allow for maturity of vision and observation; the elaborate use of allusions (for example, to *The Children's Hour,*

Macbeth, Hedda Gabler, Proteus, *Pygmalion, My Fair Lady, Hamlet,* Rilke, Phaedra and Hippolytus). But it also poses important moral implications that seem especially appropriate to high school students.

Early in the story, Justin recalls the morning of her thirteenth birthday when she had seen her grandfather, paralyzed by a stroke, being carried by his giant day nurse Thad through a sort of dance set to the music of Bach. She knew then that her grandfather had escaped the real world, the world of strokes and children's questions, forever. But she would always remember his wise and kind ways. In wisdom he had instructed her. "Most of the cruelty and neglect that went on in the world, he said, boiled down to the simple fact that someone just wasn't imagining how the the other fellow felt."

But as Justin learns late in the summer, forgetting this precept had led to the long-suffering of Ursula DeVane. Ursula had betrayed her own mother, having found Ida in the stone hut with Karl Klauss, the family music teacher. Pretending not to fully understand what she had seen, Ursula told her father. Quietly, her father arranged for Karl's return to Germany. Quietly, they both destroyed the only chance for happiness that Ida DeVane had ever known. Ursula had forgotten to imagine how her mother felt: she had forgotten to imagine the loneliness of a woman much younger than her father who felt forever out of place and could never compete with her husband's greatness.

And Justin, we learn, repeats Ursula's error and betrays her summer friend because she fails to be what Justin so wanted her to be. Very often young people are caught in similar dilemmas. How can you react when your idols have fallen? How do you behave when adults disappoint you and limitations abound?

Gail Godwin's novel, although nearly four hundred pages long, was read quickly and eagerly by both my sophomores and seniors this year. The book allowed them to become excited about the possibilities of their own culture and to learn, along the way, many of the essentials of all great fiction — old and new.

Hope Versus Despair In Student Fiction

by
Judith Beth Cohen

Are students' visions of the nineteen eighties as bleak as Orwell's? The passive acceptance of violence and oppression I've seen in their stories of the last five years suggests students may be as numb as Oceania's masses. Stories that focus on social and political problems, racial conflict and war support the gloomiest predictions. However when they turn to the personal realm, more often their fictional territory, there is more hope. Despite broken families, rejecting parents and disappointed expectations, student writers transform these realities through irony and imaginative vision. With more powerful language than that which surfaces in the political stories, students actively shape rather than passively accept their personal worlds.

Freshman Expository Writing at Harvard is required of all students. They can choose one of seven distinctive writing courses. The Writer's Craft: Fiction assigns weekly critical essays as well as creative works. Because this option is more demanding, it draws highly motivated students who ably articulate the concerns of their less verbal peers. The stories I will discuss fall into two categories: political realities and family romances.

When I examine stories directly concerned with social and political problems, violence emerges as an inevitable force. In "Here and Now," two boys working as summer camp counselors share a tent. Nat, the protagonist, is disturbed by his friend Paul's obsession with world events. Paul can't stop talking about the disasters in the newspaper, about HIROSHIMA, the John Hersey novel he read for class. Nat calls the book "too strong" and tries to dismiss Paul's constant monologue, his detailed description of "total wreckage, carnage, people's faces burnt like melted plastic." Nat, who prefers to escape the news in the woods, watches his friend grow more disturbed as the summer progresses. Finally, on the eve of August 6, the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, Nat wakes to find that his roommate has disappeared leaving a scribbled note. He pursues him to a cliff where Paul points to a roaring overhead; he's certain that the nuclear holocaust has arrived. Nat looks up to see "a jet from Pease Air Force Base in nearby New Hampshire speed shaking through the sky." Paul jumps to his death, before his stunned friend can rescue him. To this student writer, despair over the coming conflagration has destructive power even as a nightmare. He treats his material

melodramatically; the fiction is a warning, a cautionary tale. But such an explicit statement about global issues is rare in the student work I read. More typical is a treatment of violence as something divorced from politics, a senseless force that randomly selects its victims.

In "The Echo of Violence," a group of Cambodian refugees living in Boston, emerge from a Kung Fu movie to become innocently trapped in a street fight between rival Chinese and Vietnamese gangs. As bloodied Chindee walks away from the fight, he "wondered about the point of the whole thing. It's not as if he was afraid; he'd fought and even killed in the jungles of Cambodia and had never avoided necessary violence in the streets. But this hadn't been their fight at all. It just seemed so stupid." When he arrives in his own neighborhood, eager to get home, Chindee is set upon by five strange figures; the story ends with the protagonist again a victim in a fight that isn't his.

Another story that finds violence seductive is "Thirty-five by Twenty," written by a young woman. Her protagonist, a female Army reserve officer, is involved with an older man, a Vietnam veteran whose past proximity to danger is what attracts her. Vietnam and Cambodia are not controversial military actions but appealing exploits:

> (She) felt a heady sense of adventure at the idea of Cambodia. Even if it did mean blood and guts and death. Those things were abstract, unreal, not truly frightening because she was young and conscious not of what she had to lose but only what she had to gain . . she imagined herself on a death mission into Cambodia, flying her chopper nap-of-the-earth, ack ack, all around mortars, artillary, danger, stress blood and guts and adrenelin surges guiding her heart. She always listened to her gut feelings.

Combat, a new arena for women, represents for this writer, an expansion of human possibility rather than an evil to avoid. Danger is titillating, even erotic. Since war and destruction are a given, she seems to say, why not enjoy herself. One might argue that finding pleasure in violence is a twisted affirmation, a way of saying no to utter despair. The one apocalyptic story I read leaves us with no hope whatsoever.

In "The Children of the Second Sun," a man's family and community are destroyed by a cult called "The Distorted," born from the fires of the apocalypse. Though the Job-like victim follows his oppressors, he feels no hatred for them since they aren't even human. He watches as they destroy themselves in a ceremonial suicide reminiscent of the Jim Jones cult massacre. "Shrieking and gibbering, the Distorted attacked each other, clawing, biting, robes and flesh, rendering deep flowing canyons of blood and gore." Healed by a group of Gnomes, the protagonist finds a new wife but the writer quickly quenches any element of

hope he has introduced. As the narrator watches the birth of his new child, he feels no joy. "My entire being suddenly became poison, my genitals felt like ice. Darkness overtook me and I collapsed. I understood God the creator."

This bleak vision brightens considerably when student writers choose as their subjects, family life and personal relationship, not that these "family romances" peopled by rejecting parents and confused, absurd adults are superficially cheerful, but an optimism shines through the surface. Powerful imaginative language and the successful use of irony marks these stories as superior. They proclaim that only in human relationships do these writers feel the power, real or imagined to affect the course of events.

In "Spring Funeral," a young man returning home after his father's death, feels "nothing but disgust for the bloated thing with rouge on its face, lying on its frothy cloud of silver silk." Not only does Alex despise his father, his attachment to "his mother, his Liza" is so blatantly incestuous the story seems to have come from a pre-Freudian consciousness. "His parents had always been Liza and father," the writer says, "an inadvertant distinction which led many to assume that Liza was not Alex's real mother." But she is his mother and his father's illness robbed him of the secret intimacy he had shared with her. When his father would work late, Alex was alone with her and "Liza would become a girl again, bubbling laughing, adventurous. Her long, dark hair came down from its pins onto her shoulders and Alex for once relaxed, forgetting the nervous, twiddling of his hands, the pucker of his forehead, the halt of his speech." Alex's father would come home to find the two, "faces flushed, eyes glowing, savoring the last moment of the evening's conspiracy." The writer injects no ironic tone to this young man's desire for his mother but neither does he break taboos. Alex must finally relinquish Liza; she sends him back to school, crushing his dream of being alone with her. The mother-son union isn't permitted though its possibility is what saves Alex from despair.

Many student stories contain fantasized annihilations of a bad father and imaginative evocations of an ideal parent. In "Fly Boys," the narrator is bored with Jack, her pilot-father who visits her at school. She admits they hit it off when she was young and he took her to watch trick flying demonstrations even though Jack, himself, never saw any real action in the air. Her *real* father was a World War II pilot, shot down over the Coral Sea. She dreams about the crash, "the star falls gently into the ocean, stays there for a minute on the surface of the water until it submerges, not burning anymore, just shimmering." Jack, then must be her stepfather we surmise. But the narrator surprises us, flatly stating that her mother married Jack after the war and she was born a *few years later*. "I have never been Jack's," she insists. The sin-

gle time she felt close to her father was when she and her mother witnessed a crash and thought it was Jack's plane. "Mom crushed my hand apart and I was never so excited as then again. I never loved Jack more than then. But it turned out, it wasn't his plane."

War, danger, and destruction are romantic and the narrator identified with the old fashioned martyr-hero. Like the woman in the military story she's attracted to battle as if it's virgin territory for women to claim. But her imaginative identification with Jack, her spiritual father is more powerful and convincing than the young officer's attraction to her Vietnam veteran. Both Alex in "Spring Funeral" and the narrator of "Fly Boys" transform reality and redesign human relationships, getting the parent they prefer through fantasy. Rather than accepting grim reality, these writers project hope.

The successful use of irony and magical realism missing in the public issue stories give the family romances a broader vision. "On Dining" is a mock essay whose artifice is that it isn't fiction at all but documentary, a slice of social realism. A modern family gathers at the grandparent's home to celebrtate Uncle Larry's birthday. No one escapes the writer's satirical gaze, not the grandmother with her bell bottoms and her mispronounced French phrases, not the narrator's father hustling to get Rolling Stones concert tickets, nor Uncle Larry, balding, divorced, "not resplendent in his red pants, not at all." Larry we learn "gave up the practice of law to practice selling laser art. He thinks that he is finding himself. I am finding that his eye twitches." When she kisses him, his breath smells of pot. "He probably didn't gargle on purpose," she says. Despite the narrator's distance and superiority as she pokes fun at all three generations, her pain over her own parents' divorce isn't camouflaged. "Not so good," she says when her grandmother asks about her mother. She refuses the slice of birthday cake offered for her mother. "She doesn't eat sweets," she says simply. Understatement and irony give this writer control over the foolish adults who mess up their own lives as well as hers. This imaginative distance creates the possibility of a different reality. Though we can't predict what her life will look like, we can be sure she'll be able to laugh at herself, an ability her own relatives lack.

A very different approach to family life comes through in "Where the River Runs to the Sea." A first person narrative set in a timeless Puerto Rican village, this work evokes the lyricism and magic of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez. The narrator and her mother are alone, "the last white family in Campos Negros," hated by the villagers. "It was as if my mother and I were surrounded by tenuous layers of light and darkness. But the darkness was always in people's eyes. Always." Considered crazy like her mother, the girl is ostracized by her classmates, but she

finds solace in a secret place on a cliff, a place she can no longer claim alone after a boy follows her there. The hope in this story lies not in the bleak situation, but in the writer's ability to transform what she sees, to animate nature, suggesting possibilities beyond her given reality.

When Isabel, their servant, rejects her mother's command to build a chapel, the girl thinks "the sound of mangoes falling at night when bats came and worried the fruit from their branches." When Isabel smiles, it "is like a day when the air was unbearably hot, the sea eerily still and the shore black with fish that have wandered too far into the shallow water." In this girl's mind, her mother's tears can become glass, cutting the hated Isabel's feet, the colored sash on the wooden Christ can begin to move, alive with the centipedes who live in the wood. As the story ends, the narrator watches as the boy who violated her secret place plunges into the sea. It's as if she planned it but still "it hurt to see the wildness of the green and blue devouring him, even more it hurt to see that Martin did not struggle." As in the first story, where the obsessed camp counselor falls to his death, here too, one youngster watches another die but here this time the narrator's magical vision makes the violent world her own. If tears can be glass, if wood can crawl, if an intruder can be purged, then the world is more than a place of random violence. This writer goes beyond the satirical critique offered by the ironic realist; she shows us that reality itself can be altered.

Human resilience is celebrated in student stories that focus on domestic life. Though birth after the apocalypse may mean despair, though the threat of the nuclear nightmare has destructive power, an idea and acceptance of violence permeates mediocre prose in the domestic realm, fathers can be imaginatively molded, mothers can be desired, nature can be animated. In their ability to wield the ironic knife, to see beyond the given surface of life, there lies hope. Passive acceptance may be the student's response to world problems, but imaginative transformation is still possible in the realm of human relationships.

History, Myth, and Poetry: Writing the Historical Persona Poem

by
Ruth Whitman

In his discussion of persona in his essay, "The Three Voices of Poetry," T. S. Eliot says:

> The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself — or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet in addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.

I would now add a fourth voice, namely the voice of the poet writing not in his own person, but within the limits of a historical character, not in a play, but in a poem written to elucidate another known life. Eliot asks, when speaking of Browning's dramatic monologues, "Is there perhaps another voice which I failed to hear, the voice of the dramatic poet whose dramatic gifts are best exercised outside of the theater?" The answer, as evidenced by the historical persona poems written by American poets in the last ten years, is that such a voice has clearly developed. Eliot, speaking of Browning, goes on to say that "dramatic monologue cannot create a character." But what of the historical character that already exists and is identified, explored, and recreated by the poet? Eliot describes writing in the persona of a historical character as "mimicry." He claims that poets can only "mimic a character otherwise known to us." And, he continues, "does not the point of the mimicry lie in the recognition of the person mimicked and in the incompleteness of the illusion?" I would suggest that the illusion may be more complete, through the metaphorical power of the poem, than any prosaic historical exegesis.

Insisting that Browning is merely impersonating his historical characters, Eliot asks, "Why should a man put on fancy dress and a mask only to talk to himself?" He then repeats the Horatian dictum that it is to amuse, instruct, tell a story. That may well be true of Browning. Perhaps it was not his purpose to do more than impersonate. But in the fourth voice that I have added to Eliot's three, the poet aims to *become*

the other, not merely to tell a tale to an audience, but to reveal the essence of a well-known historical character.

II

There are three primary stages through which the modern poet usually passes in writing an extended historical persona poem. These can be described as (1) identification; (2) obsession; and (3) transcendence.

George Eliot remarked that in all that she considered her best writing, there was a "not herself" which took possession of her, and that she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which this spirit was acting. Gustave Flaubert wrote in a letter to H. A. Taine, "When I wrote about Emma Bovary's poisoning I had the taste of arsenic so strongly in my mouth, I was so thoroughly poisoned myself, that I gave myself two bouts of indigestion, one after another, two very real bouts, since I vomited up my entire dinner."

Identifying with their characters has long been a commmon experience for novelists; the experience is similar for the poet writing a historical persona poem, especially in an extended poem which allows for a more complete immersion of personality. On this point Eliot makes some excellent remarks:

> In writing for the chorus of women of Canterbury in "Murder in the Cathedral," I had to make some effort to identify myself with these women, instead of merely identifying them with myself . . .
>
> . . .
>
> I can't see, myself, any way to make a character live except to have a profound sympathy with that character . . . . It seems to me that what happens, when an author creates a vital character, is a sort of give-and-take. The author may put into that character, besides its other attributes, some trait of his own, some strength or weakness, some tendency to violence or to indecision . . . that he has found in himself. Something perhaps never realized in his own life . . . something not restricted in transmission to characters of the same temperament, the same age, and least of all, the same sex. Some bit of himself that the author gives to a character may be the germ from which the life of that character starts.

In a recent interview, Frank Bidart said that because his identification with Nijinsky was so powerful, his persona poem, "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky" is more personal and intimate than any of his autobiographical poems. In this age of introspection and self-analysis, with the

insight that Freudian and post-Freudian literature has made available, it is easier to recognize the links between one's own dark subconscious and another's. Bidart felt in common with Nijinsky a passion for his art, great rage at women, and the fear of losing control. While links between poet and subject may be different, in every case the poet feels an emotional hook in the persona to which he or she can attach, some central theme that sparks a feeling of passionate kinship, despite difference in age, sex, or circumstance.

Stephen Berg, writing about the poet Anna Akhmatova in *Akhmatova At The Black Gates*, said that a lyric voice began to rise in himself that was not his own. He recognized this voice in Akhmatova's poems, which expressed something he couldn't reach in himself, a mixture of the personal and political which he could attain only by projecting himself into her experience. He felt too that his disappointed erotic experience was closely akin to hers.

The key word in this process of identification is incarnation: the poet *incarnates* himself in another; something in the other answers something in him. Paradoxically, this identification involves a self-forgetting in order to remember a life one has never lived. Poets suspend their own lives to get inside the head of their persona; at the same time, some of their own experiences reappear transformed.

The sense of identification with the historical persona, however, is not enough. Mere feeling, however expressive, needs substance. This entails a period of obsessive immersion in the details of the life. The poet is driven to master all the factual material available because it is in the specific details and events of the life that the seeds of the ultimate metaphor lie. Emerson said, "Ask the facts for the form." When poets master the facts, driven by their obsession to do so, they discover that both the form and meaning are organic to them, just as leaf and blossom are inherent in the seed.

In many ways, John Berryman's *Homage To Mistress Bradstreet* is the model for contemporary poets interested in translating the historical persona. Berryman tells that as he read Anne Bradstreet's poems and investigated her social, cultural and historical background, he began to fall in love with her, and in a certain mystical sense, to become her. It then occurred to him, while writing the poem, to sleep with her. This is a daring act, both heterosexual and onanistic, an act which actually takes place in the poem, and which for him — and for the reader — signifies his identification with her, a physical symbol of his spiritual melding with her. The poets I have mentioned have spent weeks, months, sometimes years immersing themselves in their subjects, although none has gone as far as Berryman in penetrating, so to speak, the inner reality of his persona.

As the factual material gathers, the question of form inevitably arises. How shall the material be organized, how can poets use their knowledge without allowing the facts to obstruct their vision? Most researchers collect more material than they can use. The moment comes when it is time to stop absorbing and start writing. Sometimes the writing starts to take place simultaneously with the studying. When this happens, identification and obsession have merged and it is time to take the next step.

Eliot differentiates between the various processes which produce his three voices. In a poem of the first voice concerned primarily with the poet's psychic material, the material tends to create or impose its own form; in fact, there is a simultaneous development of form and material. In the poetry of the second or third voice — the dramatic work — the form is partly dictated by the outline or scenario. In the case of my fourth voice, form often reflects events in the historical person's life. Quite sensibly, Eliot concedes that all three of his voices may be interwoven. The first, or lyric voice, where the poet speaks to himself, may be uttered by a dramatic character, that is, the voice of the character and of the poet may sound in unisson. But there is also audible "in lines by one of the supreme poetic dramatists . . . a more impersonal voice still than that of either the character or the author." In describing this last phenomenon of a universal cosmic voice, Eliot is touching on the transcendence which I regard as the ultimate aim of writing a historical persona narrative, an aim profoundly influenced by the form that the poet chooses.

That brilliant and prolific craftsman, Robert Browning, knew that whatever monologue he wrote, the form would be fixed, it would rhyme, it would be metrical. But contemporary American poets usually employ every option except fixed traditional forms, although in a sequential narrative they may well use occasional fixed forms. Writing a narrative, even when using impressionistic, surreal, or expressionistic devices, means following some kind of linear pattern. If poets are not going to use a consistent narrative form like Homer's *Iliad*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or, to cite a more contemporary example, Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Tristram*, they must look to such innovative extended sequences as Whitman's *Song Of Myself*, Pound's *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, H. D.'s *Helen In Egypt*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and the many linked lyrics, juxtapositions and collages that fill twentieth-century volumes of poetry.

In his *Homage To Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman invented an eight-line stanza in which the first and eighth lines rhyme, the second, fourth and seventh use a rhyme or identical word, the fifth and sixth lines rhyme and the third line remains unrhymed. This is an appropriate in-

vention for a seventeenth-century persona, herself a poet who wrote in fixed form. Other poets have felt free to intersperse prose passages and documentary passages with their lyrics; to use syllabic verse, songs, conversation, letters, or simply linked free-verse lyric passages divided into sections. Form dictates the mechanics of transcendence. The way poets choreograph their material controls and manipulates the reader's response, so that through attachment to the persona and identification with the experience, readers are led to an insight beyond their immediate perception.

I have been discussing the writing of persona poetry largely from the point of view of the author — the inception of the idea, the intention, the methods of working. I have in fact been speaking primarily of the interaction between the poet and the persona. This description, however, represents only two sides of what is an essentially triangular series of relationships, namely those between poet and persona, persona and poet on one side; between poet and reader, reader and poet on the second; and between persona and reader, reader and persona on the third.

Schools of criticism today tend to focus primarily on the reader, often to the exclusion of the poets together with their problems and intentions, and sometimes even to the exclusion of the text, which is occasionally declared to exist only in the mind of the respondent. As a poet and author, I feel strongly that all three sides of the triangle of relationships have equal weight and equal reality. In analyzing the ultimate transcendental effect of a successful historical persona poem, however, we see that the relationship shifts from that between poet and persona to that between persona and reader.

At this point the reader — and perhaps a consensus of readers — feels a strong emotional identification with the persona and is able to perceive the personal experience in its symbolic essence. Not only is the persona's historical image illuminated, but beyond that, human experience in general — the reader's own experience and understanding of universal experience — is intensified. In other words, the concrete account of a personal life or a portion of the life, conveyed according to the formal choices of the poet, lifts out of its specificity, detaches itself from the poet's voice, addresses itself directly to the reader, and becomes universal. This rising into another level of apprehension is characteristic of most successful works of art, although the method of achieving it, having to do with the formal accumulation of detail through which the work speaks directly to the beholder, remains essentially mysterious. The exact point of transcendence, like the instant when apprehension ignites in the brain, is hard to determine. But when that point of transcendence occurs, the moral meaning of the life rises beyond its specificity and becomes archetypal.

III

Perhaps an example from my own experience will help elucidate the three-fold process I have described above. After the publication of my second collection of poems, *The Marriage Wig*, in 1968, I began to feel impatient with the limitations of the short lyric form. I wanted to find a form that would move more slowly, encompassing more time and space for the developing image. More important, I was impatient with the limitations of subjective poetry, especially the dead end of confessional poetry. I wanted to move out of my own experience and into someone else's life. I felt it was time for me to attempt a transformation, a transference into other lives, feelings and characters, events that had actually taken place.

I began by working on a poem about Lizzie Borden, the nineteenth-century spinster in Fall River, Massachusetts who allegedly killed her father and stepmother. I felt a certain identity with her: her sense of suppressed libido, her status in a repressive society, and her rage at being prevented from expressing herself as a woman and a creative human being. Her *wish* to murder her father and stepmother was more important to me than the controversy over whether she had actually committed the crime. I was interested in the anatomy of her emotions.

Fortunately, a great deal of documentary material was available, notably the complete court records and the studies by the famous criminologist Edmund Pearson. I steeped myself in the material, read the contemporary newspapers of 1892, visited Lizzie's house in Fall River, wrote a play, a narrative poem, and then threw most of the writing away. There had to be a new way of handling the inner events of her life.

In the documents themselves I found the essential metaphorical elements I wanted to use in the poem: the terrible heat on the day of the murder, the pears in the backyard, the egg Lizzie couldn't break. I realized I must stop overwriting nonessential. After ten years of sporadic work, I wound up with the eight-page poem that was published in *The Massachusetts Review*, Women issue, and which eventually became the title poem in my book *The Passion of Lizzie Borden* (1973).

If the theme that engaged me in the sixties was sexual and emotional repression, I became concerned in the seventies with the dilemma of survival, particularly the problem of how a heroic woman would cope with loss and disaster in a predominantly male-oriented society. I began to look for a woman to write for.

Perhaps because this need had penetrated deeply into my subconscious, Tamsen Donner appeared to me when I was coming out of ether after a minor operation. Half asleep, I discovered I was writing a pas-

sage on the lined yellow pad I always keep beside my bed. I was writing a third page, not in my own person or time. I seemed to be a pioneer woman in the nineteenth century who was approaching a last range of mountains and wondering if I could get across safely with my family. Here is the passage, as it was eventually incorporated into the book:

We are facing
the last mountains;
sometimes we walk
with the children
beside the wagon
to rest the lame oxen

the mountains rise
unscalable
the road is
a fiction
I am not inside this story
I am sitting beside my husband
a frame
to the picture

there is surf I know
on the other side of the pass:
somewhere beyond this wall
the end of land
and a summer sea

I became obsessed with the need to know who this woman was. In the Widener and Schlesinger libraries in Cambridge, I found journals and documents, histories and stories of early women pioneers. I imagined Tamsen Donner as one when I read about the Donner party and its tragic disaster in the Sierra mountains in 1846. There was nothing unusual about her sudden appearance in my head. When I was sixteen in the late 50's I had read George Stewart's account of the Donner party, *Ordeal by Hunger*, in which Tamsen Donner is mentioned. The creative subconscious works in mysterious ways.

I saw that — initially at least — Tamsen Donner's life and mine touched at various points: our origins in New England, our attachment to the sea, our lives devoted to teaching and poetry, our multiple marriages, our three children — enough to provide several points of contact, like the electrical connections that produce light.

In the Newberry Library in Chicago, I found more pioneer journals. In Springfield, Illinois, where Tamsen lived for ten years before she began the journey to California, I read her contemporary newspaper, *The Sangamon Journal*, looking for her poems, but "ladies" did not sign

their poems in 1836. Tamsen had, however, written three signed letters to the newspaper during her journey west in 1846, and I had copies of those to provide me with a clue to her character and style. She must have kept a journal on the trip as did several of her companions, but it did not survive. I knew that I must write her lost journal for her.

I used as much contemporary material as I could — writings by Francis Parkman, John Bidwell, Mark Twain, Myra Eells, Narcissa Whitman, John Thornton, and many others. After my third draft, which was weighed down by too many details, I realized I was trying to handle too much. As in writing about Lizzie Borden, I was more concerned with the interior events than with the external happenings. Over my desk I pinned up a remark made by Mark Twain to Rudyard Kipling, as a kind of beacon for my work:

Know everything, then distort.

Although many writers have written of places they never saw, I felt I needed to go west along the Oregon and California trails to see the land for myself. I studied maps, travel books, federal Public Works Administration guide books to the United States, and kept a huge map on my wall, with the route traced out in red ink. I finally wrote Tamsen's lost journal, based on these written guides. But in 1975, four years after I had started work, I received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts which enabled me to set out that June with my eighty-year-old father and fifteen-year-old son, driving west along the Oregon trail.

We took a month to make the trip, traveling slowly, and stopping for several days in places where the Donner party had camped. I kept my own journal. As the American landscape unfolded before me, I began once again to feel Tamsen Donner's presence. I watched the land flatten and dry out; the windy plains with their strange eroded formations; the snowcapped Rocky Mountains. I stood at the Continental Divide, came through Emigrant Canyon to the valley where Brigham Young had the first glimpse of his promised land; tasted the salt in the Great Salt Desert; smelled the sulphur in the wastes of Nevada. I began to see the American landscape metaphorically. Standing at Donner Pass, where half the party had perished, I saw the forty-foot-deep snow, the pine trees, the mountains through Tamsen's eyes. Finally, I stood by the Pacific Ocean, the ocean she longed for and never saw.

When I returned home that summer I rewrote the book, using some of the passages from my own journal. These passages consisted of entries in prose and the occasional poems that grew naturally out of the prose passages. I thought of the form as alternating between recitative and aria — prose and poetry — revealing Tamsen Donner's experience as the journey changed from a summer holiday to a desperate struggle

to survive. I thought of the journey in its literal sense as a typical American sequence, moving from innocence to disaster; and as woman's history, moving from dependence to courageous selfhood.

After the publication of *Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey* in 1977, I continued to explore the persona narrative. Having written about two nineteenth-century women, I wanted to write about a woman in the twentieth century, nearer to my own time, particularly one who had been involved in one of the most important periods of our century: the second World War, the Holocaust, and the founding of the state of Israel. I felt drawn to Hanna Senesh, the Israeli parachutist who had been sent on a rescue mission to Hungary in 1944. I realized that her diary, with which I had been familiar for years, stopped in January 1944, when she joined British Intelligence, and that her subsequent experience — parachuting into Yugoslavia, wandering with Tito's partisans, enduring prison in Budapest, and finally, her execution — all this needed to be described in her own words and her own poetry, not necessarily realistically, but in a combination of external fact and interior impression, again using alternating prose and poetry, as I had done in *Tamsen Donner*.

It is possible to describe the phenomena of identification and obsession in discussing the writing of a persona narrative, but the phenomenon of transcendence is much more difficult to prove. Whether the whole has become larger than the sum of its parts is a question for the reader to decide. The poet can only speak for the persona; if a true translation from one life to another has occurred, the persona will then speak to the reader.

Teaching the Writing of Poetry: Analogies with Three Other Disciplines

by
Arthur L. Clements

A great part of what I, as a writer and a teacher, have discovered is helpful to student poets can be epitomized by observing, as I do at the beginning of a semester, that Poetry contains elements that make it like three other disciplines: Music, Painting, and Philosophy (understanding this last to include Psychology, as it anciently did).

The analogy with Music naturally pertains to the aural qualities, the sounds of poetry. I tell my students that traditionally, poetry was an oral art, that poets like Homer used to sit at banquets with a flagon of wine at hand and speak aloud from memory their lengthy, even epic, poems, and that this oral tradition is alive and thriving throughout our country in the many readings that poets give. I remind them that, especially in our post-Gutenberg age and with our bookish academic education, we are apt to think of language as black, wiggly marks on a white page, rather than primarily as movements of the vocal cords, tongue, and mouth and as vibrations on our ear drums. During the early part of the semester, I introduce and explain terms and concepts such as *rhythm, rime, meter, alliteration, assonance, iambs, slant* and *internal rime, free verse, blank verse,* and *stanza.* On the theory that the more readily one recognizes these elements in other poems, the more skillfully one can use them in one's own work, I ask my students to find examples in poems of their own choosing and to write as exercises poems that incorporate some of these elements. Although many students will write most of their poems in free verse, such exercises in recognizing and employing formal elements often develop with re-writings into fine poems and result, too, in a deeper appreciation of other poets' works.

Some of the examples that I provide include poems by Pope, Coleridge and Poe, some old yet useful standbys, like the following lines from "An Essay on Criticism," which precisely embody meanings by means of sounds:

> True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
> As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
> 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
> The sound must seem an echo to the sense:

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar:
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.
Hear how Timotheus' varied lays surprise,
And bid alternate passions fall and rise!

Pope's riming and highly alliterative couplets also exemplify with variation the iambic pentameter line. They reward consideration of the varying lengths of time it takes to pronounce different lines, even though the lines contain the same number of syllables. For example, the harsh consonantal clusters and the spondees of lines 8-11 slow down their reading aloud, while the sounds of lines 12-13 and particularly the unstressed juxtaposed second and third syllables, the elision, and the extra foot of line 13 encourage a faster reading. Students are soon ready to consider other metrical patterns and their distinctive musical effects, both named and illustrated with Coleridge's own stress markings in his poem "Metrical Feet":

Trochee trips from long to short;
From long to long in solemn sort
Slow Spondee stalks; strong foot! yet ill able
Ever to come up with Dactyl trisyllable.
Iambics march from short to long—
With a leap and a bound the swift Anapests throng;

Poe's "Annabel Lee" provides further examples of the iambic and anapestic units, and their lulling, mesmerizing rhythmic effects. The last stanza contains frequent alliteration and internal rimes, and its many long i sounds seem to imitate and reveal the speaker's sighing for his lost love:

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
  Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
  Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
  In the sepulchre there by the sea,
  In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Certain poems are remarkably well suited for focusing attention on the music or sounds of poetry. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is a good example because of its combination of sense and nonsense words, most notably in its well-known first (and lst) stanza:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgrabe.

It is, incidentally, interesting to hear students' explanations of what the nonsense words in the poem might mean, after giving them Carroll's clues that "slithy" and "mimsy" are portmanteau words meaning respectively "lithe and slimy" and "flimsy and miserable." The free verse of Mona Van Duyn's "What The Motorcycle Said" also directs special attention to its onomatopoetic sounds, and demonstrates the importance of reading poems aloud. I quote only the first and last two stanzas:

Br-r-r-am-m-m, rackety-am-m, OM, *Am:*
All—r-r-room, r-r-ram, ala-bas-ter—
Am, the world's my oyster.

I hate plastic, wear it black and slick,
hate hardhats, wear one on my head,
that's what the motorcycle said . . .

Passed a cow, too fast to hear her moo, "I rolled
our leaves of grass into one ball.
I am the grassy All."

Br-r-r-am-m-m, rackety-am-m, OM, *Am:*
All—gr-r-rin, oooohgah, gl-l-utton—
Am, the world's my smile button.

Careful study of poems by some favorite poets, such as Donne, Shakespeare, Keats, Hopkins, Yeats, Thomas, and Roethke, gives students useful understandings of the music as well as the other dimensions of poetry.

The analogy with painting encourages young poets to think of poetry as a verbal art which imaginatively presents "pictures" largely through concrete, particular, sensuous language. Poetry is unlike Philosophy and other verbal academic disciplines, in that these disciplines tend to present ideas in abstract, general, non-sensuous language, whereas poetry uses both abstract and concrete words, often with considerably more of the latter and with uncommon detail and vividness. I turn our discussion toward indirection, toward presenting one element, idea, or characteristic in terms of something else, such as presenting the obscure, abstract, non-sensuous by means of the graphic, particular, and sensuous, or the non-pictorial by means of the pictorial. Writers are encouraged not just to tell flatly but also to show vividly — and, indeed, not just to show visually but to show through *all* of the senses. I introduce and explain relevant terms, such as *metaphor, simile, figurative language, imagery, connotation,* and *denotation.* Again, I ask my students

to find examples in favorite poems and to write poems deliberately focusing on these elements.

One introductory way of explaining some of these terms is to remark that figurative language uses words in their associative, suggestive, or connotative senses rather than in the strict literal, dictionary or denotative senses. Thus to say that "the knife is as sharp as a razor" is to speak literally, but to say "the wind is as sharp as a razor" is to make a figurative comparison, to use a simile. Students see the distinction immediately when they are told that the poet's line "my love is like a red, red rose" does not mean she has a red face and green, thorny legs! And they are able to offer some of the meanings suggested in the simile, such as that she is delicate, sweet-smelling, and lovely. Similarly, "gather ye rosebuds while ye may" is not advice to go into the garden and make a bouquet, just as "make hay while the sun shines" is not to be taken literally. And although both may be viewed as similar figurative expressions of the *carpe diem* theme, students appreciate the subtler or further connotative differences between the tenderness of "rosebuds" and the lustiness of "make hay"; they appreciate that someone gathering rosebuds is in a much different state of mind and emotion than someone making hay.

Shakespeare's sonnets "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" and "That time of year thou mayst in me behold," among others, not only offer additional illustrations of poetry's music, but also demonstrate the aspects of "painting" in poetry through their figures and imagery. With its open comparison extending throughout most of the poem, the first sonnet encourages consideration of simile and metaphor as explicit and implicit figurative comparisons, respectively. The parallel images of music and poetry in the second sonnet organize it into three quatrains and a couplet, and present three complex metaphors, three elaborated comparisons of the speaker to autumn, to twilight, and to a dying fire. By presenting himself and his condition in these particular, vivid, sensuous terms, he renders the abstract and unknown into the graphic and known:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
> As after sunset fadeth in the west,
> Which by and by black night doth take away,
> Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
> In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
> That on the ashes of his youth doth lie
> As the deathbed whereon it must expire,

Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Similarly, Donne's ingenious and extended comparison of the lovers' two souls to a geometrical compass makes the nature and relationship of the spiritual, invisible, and obscure souls understandable by means of the physical, visible, concrete drawing instrument:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two:
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do;

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like the other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

If class time allows, broader studies of major patterns of imagery in Shakespeare's or Donne's or other poets' works can be pointedly instructive and valuable for student poets.

The analogy with Philosophy (that is, Philosophy-Psychology) refers to the ideational and emotional content of poetic language. Generally, students have little difficulty understanding that poetry expresses ideas and feelings, but conveying ideas and feelings in "musical" and "pictorial" language is another, more complicated matter. While these young poets write a variety of ideational and emotional poetry, I encourage them to think particularly about the concepts and feelings concerning "self," especially because many of them tend to write personal or confessional poetry with a first-person singular speaker, the so-called I-narrator. In the course of the semester, this emphasis on the self leads to discussions of persona, voice, tone, attitude, the relation of author to speaker and to poem, the archetype of the rebirth of the self, and so forth. I suggest in class that, as Galway Kinnell said, poetry has "the task of breaking out of the closed ego" or unshared "I" of self-absorbed writing, that more successful poetry is somehow both personal and universal. As James Applewhite observes in *The Poetry Review*, too many poets are "so intensely self-conscious that for them the simplicity of loss of self in the contemplation of something larger has become impossible" (II, 1, 24). And too many poets neglect craft and subtle art for the sake of pursuing only the currently fashionable simplicity of minimalist plainness, flatness, prosiness.

Students readily see the distinction between author and speaker of first-person poems such as Donne's "Break of Day" and Tennyson's "Ulysses" are read aloud and discussed in class. From such discussions we move on to consider the speaker's tone, which indicates their attitude toward the subject and audience. The I-narrator of "Ulysses" is proud, boastful, and restless, but he is surely not to be identified with the poet. In E. E. Cummings' "Portrait," for another example, the speaker takes an unconventional tone and attitude toward death. His tone and attitude are not the usual respect, but as conscious irreverence, unabashed, unawed, even slangy in reverence toward death. If it is a little more difficult to distinguish between the poet and the I-narrator of "Portrait," it is extremely difficult to do so in other poems, such as Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" and in many of the poems that the students themselves write. Nevertheless, they come to understand that every poem is founded upon a role, that by its tone and attitude, every poem involves a persona or mask that the poet assumes. The best poets somehow manage to express the persona's experiences in ways which have both individual and general significance. The I-centered poetry of Walt Whitman, for example, illustrates the breaking out of the closed ego or mere role-playing, skillfully renders the I-narrator's personal experience, largely through Whitman's sympathetic and imaginative capacity to identify with others, and demonstrates its universal character.

Because students need to develop the capacity to transcend the personal, during the semester we discuss and develop poetic strategies for transforming the isolated persona or skin-encapsulated ego into the essential self, particular and real, yet somehow universal and connected with other parts of creation. With examples parenthetically given from Kinnell's poetry, these strategies include: use of first-person plural and/or third person to replace first-person singular ("For Robert Frost"); the various means of transforming an I-narrator into another creature or person, or representative man ("The Bear"); structuring a poem to move from personal to mythic (and thereby universal) dimensions and import ("Fergus Falling"); structuring a poem to affect the opening of the closed ego or transcending of the personal "I' through the play of literal against figurative meanings ("The Porcupine"); and use of both extended, complex syntax and lengthy poems in sections or sequences to suggest an interconnected, unified cosmos (all of Kinnell's poems just mentioned). Obviously, these matters can become very complex, and some of them are more suitable for the advanced rather than the beginning writer.

While we attend to many and various concerns during the semester in class, workshops, and conferences, these analogies have proven particularly valuable, and they give the subject shape and clarity.

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